

Harry Potter and the Wastelands of Time

There are only two worlds – your world, which is the real world, and the other worlds, the fantasy. Worlds like this are worlds of the human imagination; their reality, or lack of reality, is not important. What is important is that they are there. These worlds provide an alternative. Provide an escape. Provide a threat. Provide a dream, and power; provide refuge, and pain. They give your world meaning. They do not exist, and thus they are all that matters.

Do you understand?

Prologue – On Time's Watch

*Just hold me closer, tiny dancer.
We'll count the headlights on the highway...
Lay me down in sheets of linen
You've had a busy day today.*

--Elton John

I was born to run.

Of that I am sure.

To run and fight, to resist and defy the nightmares that threaten to cover the entire world in darkness never-ending. The darkness of dreams gone awry, of ambition gone mad, of chaos become eternal.

There are Keys to Time, and these keys are guardians...

—Harry, run!—

...of the Locks to the Past.

—Say, can you hear that, Potter? It is the sound of the Reaper...—

Nothing rests between one time and the last save...

—He killed them! He slaughtered them all like fucking animals and I stood back and let it happen—

...hopeless despair and the promise that maybe, somehow, this time it will be different.

—Don't fight him, Harry. You can't possibly win.—

I know not what will happen next, or if I'll even survive the trip, but I have to try. *I have to*. The world isn't worth living in during these dark days, and never will be again – because the dark days are forever now. There's not even any sky, just tortured storm clouds bulging with vicious unforgiving crimson lightning. The planet itself is dying, failing, a trait of my existence...

—The past belongs to long ago. Just what in Merlin's name are you?—

I miss the wind and the gentle afterglow of twilight. I miss the smell of fresh rainfall and strawberries. I miss green apples and honest white roses. Perhaps this way I can make the struggle matter. And save all that can be saved. After all...

—Have you heard this story? Once upon a time, when humanity was young and pure, there was a box. A box they were told never to open – but one man went and opened it anyway. He unleashed all the evils of this world... power... violence... corruption... greed... envy...—

...there is no world left here. Just scattered remains and remnants of humanity huddling for warmth under the scorched and ruined sky. Perhaps this is the closest to heaven that we'll ever be as a race that thrives on war and conflict. Peace is a fickle thing, and was outlawed a long time ago. Ah, well... I don't want the world to see me, because I don't think that they'll understand this last, desperate bid for salvation. I promised myself I would not do this.

—The box was slammed shut but it was too late, the damage had been done. All that remained in the box was a single ray of light – the light of Hope. Harry Potter, we now face those same evils for the last time, here at the end of all things, and you are that last ray of light, our only hope.—

Easier to make that promise. Easier to do a lot of things, like walk away. But the difference is vast between what is right and what is easy. Amen, Dumbledore? That's right... Rest in peace, old man.

—*Please, tell me what you are?*—

No matter what happens, isn't it important to try?

—*Very well, I am Lady Time.*—

Time?

—*Time.*—

Oh...

—*Just who were you expecting?*—

I do not know... but Time's up, isn't it?

—*Yes, yes it is, Harry James Potter. And this is really, really going to hurt.*—

Fuck it, do your worst...

A/N: *Oh yes, a time-travel story, but with an original twist you'll see next chapter.*

DAWN

Chapter 1 – Waking Up

Baby, I've been here before.

I know this room, I've walked this floor.

--Rufus Wainwright, Halleluiah

I've written this beginning so many times now.

And every time I do, back here at the start, I carry with me that small spark of hope that somehow, this time will be different. That the choices I make will not lead to the end of the entire world. The hope never lasts long, such is life and the mistakes I make time and time again.

Ah... but those choices never lead anywhere else, do they? And even when I die I wake up here again in my own personal never-ending Hell. A loop in time that I exploited once, at the end of what I suppose could be called my first life, and now can't escape no matter what I do, or how many times I fail...

I'm not entirely certain why I write this every time it happens – I mean, I barely remember the last time, or the time before that, or the time before that, and so on, so on... I know they happened, I know it, but the timeline itself is fuzzy, half-remembered, a dream. Unrealised realities that lived and breathed, and slaughtered the innocent.

*I remember **her**, and look how hard I press the quill to the parchment, but surely that can't be real – just a dream within a nightmare – a girl like that would never fall for a guy like me. Guys like me watch the world end time and time again, and always my choices fail to make a difference. Girls like her couldn't possibly live with the look in my eyes – the hungry, haunted look of a man who knows how fragile civilisation is, because he's seen it come crashing down around him... more than once.*

So what do you know so far? I think you know who I am, perhaps you've heard of my legend. Here are a few clues...

I survived the Killing Curse at the tender age of one. I should never have seen my second birthday. I've battled with demons and monsters, defied gods and slain eternity. I've stolen forgotten years from the clutches of chaos, and shared my mind and my soul with a Dark Lord. I've seen the world end, and travelled through time only to see it end again and again...

My name is Harry Potter, I am twenty four years old, always twenty four although I do not look it, and it is the summer before my sixth-year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The summer that everything must change, does change, will change, has changed...

I have one question for you, dear reader, before we begin... do you believe that love can transcend the bounds of time and space, that romance can light the fires of the soul and that nothing, absolutely nothing, is more dangerous than the best of our good intentions?

Do you?

Hmm... do you really?

Strap yourself in then, because this is really going to hurt...

Oh and yes, before you write me off as an angst-ridden whiny teenager, I will say that there is one positive in all of this – the sex is always great. First time every time, ladies and gents, for Harry Potter, the Lord of Time.

I awoke from the dream – the Dream, the same Dream – and turned to glance out of the window above my bed, as I always did, wanting to catch the first rays of sunlight beaming in on my renewed life.

I sighed and basked in the warmth. *Back again.* And where I'd come from there had been no sunlight for over three years – just a scorched and ruined sky of acrid black smog and crimson lightning. It

was the small things one missed when faced with the end of all things, like the sun and sky.

Yet all of those memories were *fuzzy*, swimming in and out of thought and consciousness, as they always were at the beginning.

The future is never written – remember that, even if you remember nothing else – and trying to hold memories of a time that hadn't happened yet, and that had virtually no chance of playing out the same way again, was like trying to hold water in a sieve.

Impossible and pretty much pointless.

Yet I always remember enough of the last time and the times before to do things differently. To make all the old mistakes in new and exciting ways... That was a funny thought in a sad and lonely way. I think I've had it before, maybe not.

I jumped up and out of bed at Number Four, Privet Drive – there was work to be done, after all, and already events were in motion that would lead, inevitably it seemed, to the end of the world.

It was the summer after the battle at the Department of Mysteries, and Sirius' death was fresh in my young mind. More than once I had tried to go back earlier than this, to prevent Voldemort's rebirth entirely, but no matter how much power I used or how hard I wished it so, this was as far back in time I could go.

And still, eight years was pretty damned impressive, especially when all the theory said it was impossible.

Moving out of the small bedroom and onto the landing, I could hear the Dursley's moving about downstairs and went into the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, first of all, just to make sure I looked like I should – a teenager, only weeks away from his sixteenth birthday. My unruly hair stuck up every which way, and beneath my heavy fringe the damned lightning-bolt scar was red and enflamed.

And moving.

My skin was moving, *crawling*... stretching. It looked hazy, almost out of focus. My entire body seemed to be fluid, moving within the bounds of my form. I smiled grimly and waved my hand through the air. I left a shadowy imprint before the mirror like a flesh-coloured rainbow, as if I were moving in super-slow motion.

Oh yeah, things were as they should be.

Splashing my face with water, I braced myself – it was coming any minute now. I could already feel it building in the back of my eyes. Just a tingle for the moment... yet the pressure rose fast, just like pain. I grabbed one of the hand towels from the rack next to the mirror and put it between my teeth – if I was quick enough I'd be able to catch the worst of it. I gripped the edge of the sink as the tingling in my eyes became uncomfortable, and then the *backlash* caught up with me...

Travelling back through time and cheating death all at once is not nearly as easy as it sounds. And each time it seems to hurt a little more. I wonder about that sometimes, why each time I go back hurts more than the last. It's a difference, and differences are worth their weight in gold.

The necessary force and sheer amount of power required to transport me not only through time, but into my younger self, was simply extraordinary. I wasn't just transporting matter – which was impossible – but my *soul*, which was equally impossible. To this day I do not really understand how it was done. All I know was that it worked, and that was good enough.

I had some idea, scraps of half a dozen crazy theories...

It had something to do with negatively charging every molecule and particle in my body to twice the speed of light, and then hitting the afterburners and throwing it all into reverse so hard and so fast that reality was torn apart – only locally mind, around me – and a gateway was opened between one time and another.

Always this time, always this summer, why not any other time? Why?

It meant I always arrived with my molecules still vibrating, hence the appearance of slow-motion movement – it wasn't, parts of me were actually still spinning near the speed of light, nothing slow about that at all – and it meant that when time caught up with me and my mind relaxed, the aftershock of such a trip hurt like all the cruciatus curses ever cast hitting me at once, whilst getting kicked in the balls.

And here it was...

I cried out between my teeth and bit down hard on the towel, the scream roaring in my throat. My hands gripped the green porcelain sink so hard that my knuckles turned white, and after a few moments I succeeded in pulling the sink from the tiled wall. One of the pipes burst and water sprayed up into the ceiling as I fell to my knees, and from there onto my back, sweating and moaning.

"Tempus fugit..." I whispered, managing a rough laugh. "Oh damn it all..."

I was young again.

The main reason for travelling through time, I had decided many years ago, was that I never had enough of it. And second chances could sometimes mean the whole world.

Always at the beginning I felt as if I had enough time, enough foreknowledge of what could happen, to make a difference. Yet that wasn't so. Events would happen faster, and they would happen differently to what I remembered, because every new choice I made would steer history down a different path – similar paths, no doubt, yet I had learnt the hard way several times not to trust my knowledge of the future, however scattered and hazy it might be.

Already things were different – I had not broken the Dursleys' bathroom sink last time. Granted that probably would not effect things to such an extent that the world would end a day or so sooner, as within the next five minutes I would be leaving Privet Drive, coming back only once to collect the belongings I couldn't take with me now.

“Hey, Hedwig,” I said, letting my snowy-white owl out of her cage. “We’re leaving, girl – fly south, I’ll be settled in our new home in a few days.”

Hedwig hooted once and nipped my ear before flying out of the open window into the bright summer sky.

From my old school trunk I pulled out a pair of torn jeans and a plain black polo shirt. I got dressed, wincing as my aching joints complained all too loudly about the downside of time travel, and shoved my wand into my back pocket. No magic yet, as the Ministry could track it and that would tip my hand too early. I’d take care of that soon.

Gazing around the tiny back bedroom, I sighed at the old clothes and spell books, at my open trunk and the end of my broomstick poking out of it. Was this really the bedroom of a man who had travelled through time to stop the end of the world?

Nope.

And that was something else I’d take care of soon.

Messing with Time (note the capital ‘T’) is kind of like making a deal with the Devil (note the capital ‘D’). You’re damned if you do, and more often than not you’re damned if you don’t.

Such is life, I guess. And death. And all that’s in between.

I read a story once, I forget what it was even about now, all those lifetimes ago, but a part of it stayed with me right up until the first end, and I think it was that story that made me willing to go through with this, to go back as far as I could and try and make a difference – no matter the cost, no matter the pain. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself in this life or the next if I hadn’t tried.

Anyway, the story taught me – and this is the only thing I can really remember – that sometimes a man has to put his soul at hazard. Just that, nothing more. But would you do it? Would you risk your soul and eternity for a second chance?

And likening it to a deal with the Devil... well, that's not too far from the truth, if I'm being honest. And I promised myself I would be. Let's just say there are older and stranger things in this world than magic, wizards and Dark Lords.

It was always pretty much the same starting all over again.

After slipping on a pair of running shoes, and shoving my Invisibility Cloak into my school bag and slinging it over my shoulder, I headed into Dudley's room and 'borrowed' the same watch I'd 'borrowed' once or twice before. Being able to tell time was important. I had a good clock in my head – you had to be able to understand time, down to a mortal second, to be able to navigate through past events – but I needed a timepiece to compare it against.

I slipped the watch onto my wrist and helped myself to a few other select items currently in Dudley's possession. As always I found a pack of cigarettes in the pocket of his leather jacket lying on the floor. Good ones, too, none of that *light* crap. In the cupboard next to the whale's bed, I removed from one of those fancy gift packs a silver lighter – a Zippo – and a 500ml bottle of lighter fluid. If he wasn't going to appreciate it I would. Everything fit nicely into the side pocket on my bag.

It was 09:42 and thirty-six seconds.

I made my way down the stairs and let myself out the front door at exactly 09:43. It was a warm July morning, here on Privet Drive, July the fourteenth to be exact. Nine-forty-three a.m. exactly on July 14th, so far I was on schedule.

I walked over my aunt's freshly cut lawn and across the driveway, hopped over the low wall and landed on the footpath before the road. It was 09:43 and twenty-four seconds, and fairly warm outside.

Red car, I thought, leaning back against the Dursleys' garden wall and looking up the street. Sure enough, at 09:43 and thirty-seconds, a red car turned onto Privet Drive, and drove right on past me.

Black and white cat, one of Arabella Figg's.

The red car startled a cat out from under one of the vehicles parked against the side of the road at 09:43 and thirty-five seconds. It scampered up onto the sidewalk and darted around a certain paving stone about six feet away from me, leaping over the wall and disappearing into Uncle Vernon's wilting hedge.

Police siren in the distance. At 09:43 and forty-five seconds, a couple of streets over, I heard the loud whining ring of a patrol car.

Funny the things you remember, doing this. I had a feeling that my memory had never been this clear before. It was almost eerie, and a little unnerving. Had I stood here last time and predicted the future? Possibly... I couldn't remember that.

There were a lot of thoughts running through my head. Some of them were from the future and past attempts, others – and these were more dominant – were thoughts my younger self had been having before I forced my way in. The memories of what had happened at the Department of Mysteries only a few short weeks ago were clearer than the memories of dying and travelling through time, of failing at the crux again.

I remembered my fifth-year at Hogwarts, and the main events of the last fifteen years, better than those memories I had of certain possible futures. That was always the way. I felt like the teenager I was, and the memories of my older self, of my older selves, were, as I have said before, hazy.

Still, I suppose you could say I was both a teenager, a soon to be sixth-year Gryffindor, and also the Time Warrior. And before you start, I didn't pick that title. No, the Devil did that...

09:44 and fifty-six seconds. I had been leaning against the Dursleys' front garden wall for nearly two whole minutes. Time to get on with the day...

"I know you're there," I said, glancing to my right and at the paving stone Mrs Figg's cat had darted around. "Not going to say hello, Tonks?"

I heard a sharp intake of breath and the rustle of fabric. A gust of warm air was disturbed around me, and I caught the scent of green apples and fresh, white roses. Her scent, always the same, always there looking out for me – I could die happy immersed in those roses.

“Harry,” my Order of the Phoenix guardian whispered furiously. “How did you know it was me? Wait a minute – you just guessed! It could have been anyone, even Mundungus, you knew someone would be here.”

“Sure I did,” I said, smiling into the air at where I knew her indigo eyes would be. They *would* be indigo, and her hair bubblegum-pink, before being with me reminded her of Sirius.

I reached over my shoulder and pulled my Invisibility Cloak from my bag, slipping it over my form quickly. It was 09:45 and twenty-eight seconds, and there was no one looking save Tonks.

“Harry!” she said.

“Hey, no one saw me but you – and at least this way no one will see me having a conversation with thin air.”

Tonks couldn’t argue with that. “Just don’t wander off,” she said. “I’m here to keep an eye on you.”

“Nothing better to do with your time?” I quipped. “You can’t keep an eye on me whilst I’m all invisible like this.” My cloak had always been big enough for two. I took a step forward and threw the slack of the invisible fabric over where I knew she was standing. “Now lift up the front of your cloak over your head,” I said.

Tonks did and I smiled when I saw her, young and, in this moment, happy – just like me, I suppose. We stood under both cloaks, enough fabric covering us from head to toe, in a small tent. She stood very close, the apples and white roses, her natural scent, warm and comforting. And her eyes were the deepest indigo, swirling with mischief, her hair light pink, like sugary fairy floss.

I hadn’t seen her for three years, not since I made a mistake that got her killed by Voldemort himself. But hey, where I just came from who

hadn't been killed by Voldemort? When Tonks died it was pretty much just me left – and then three years later the demon fixed that, too, and I woke up here this morning, about fifty minutes and forty seconds ago.

“Defiance, Harry,” the monster hissed, his eyes alight with crimson malice. “Defiance is your weakness, as sure as any. Another loved one to take the death that is yours. Avada Kedavra!”

I was on my knees, my hands tied behind me and a twelve inch blade sticking through my shoulder. Blood coated my chest, my arms, I'd already given up a second before the green light of death struck Tonks in the heart, and she fell to the burning ground before me.

Always life leaves the eyes last of all, and her eyes glazed over slowly as Voldemort's laughter echoed and echoed along the vast, empty wastelands of End World, and the fire-blasted plains of Oblivica – where even Time ceases to exist.

Ha, why do I always remember the *bad* memories in such crystal clear clarity? Says a lot about the mess my head's in...

“This is cosy,” I said. It always got me that she was taller at the beginning. Not by much, just an inch and a half, so I didn't really have to look up into her eyes. And I'm due a growth spurt over the next few months – set your watch by it.

Tonks grinned. “You look a little pale, Harry, are you feeling okay?”

“Just thinking about things, Tonks,” I said. “Bad memories.” I practically *drank* in the apples and roses – held it on the tip of my tongue. I could still taste and smell the sulphur and ash from the end of the world – just in my mind, I suppose, but I had *missed* Tonks.

“Ha, well I've missed you, too...” she said, all bemused.

I blinked and realised I had spoken my last thought aloud. Was that a blush rising on my young, pale cheeks? No, surely not.

“I miss him, too.” Tonks' hair faded to a glum brown, almost flat against her head.

Sirius, I thought. The pain of his loss was still recent to my younger self, I still felt my grief, yet I'd also accepted his death – well, accepted may not be the right word. I've made my peace time and time again each time that wound is torn open anew.

"And you've also got big bags under your eyes, Harry Potter," she said, attempting to look stern with her hands on her hips. "Not sleeping?"

Time-lag, Nymphadora. I've clocked up too many frequent flyer miles hopping through far too many time zones. "Sleeping just fine," I said.

"Liar, liar," she whispered, pursing her rose-red lips. They looked very cute and inviting. I had the strongest urge to kiss them.

I shook my head – there were dreams, and then there were Dreams. I couldn't tell the difference sometimes. And to Tonks I was just a fifteen year old wizard probably thinking impure thoughts all night long. Ha, she knew me too well!

"Don't say it."

I glanced at my watch.

"Say what?"

It was 09:47 and thirty seconds.

"Ask me where I'm going – I can't tell you."

Tonks arched an eyebrow – her hair turned an inquisitive lime green. "Oh, really? Wherever you go I'm supposed to follow at a discreet distance."

"Hmm... in case evil attacks, I presume."

"That's generally one of the roles of a protective guardian, yes, but also to keep you from getting into trouble on your own."

09:47 and forty-five seconds. I was almost out of time now.

"So where are you going, Harry Potter, the Chosen One?"

I grimaced. There was so much truth to those damned newspaper articles that it made me sick. Chosen One, indeed, in more ways than one.

“You read the papers then? I’m off to save the wizarding world... speaking of which: *Potete trovarli con Janus antico, sotto i eaves di Latium perso.*”

Tonks frowned, bemused, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. “Harry, was that Italian?”

From my bag I removed a scrap of parchment and a simple ballpoint pen. Writing down what I’d just said, knowing that in the future it had helped more than hurt, I handed the scrap of parchment to Tonks and spoke again. “*Potete trovarli con Janus antico, sotto i eaves di Latium perso.* Remember it.”

“I didn’t know you could speak another language. What are you saying?”

I shook my head with a wink, and tapped the side of my nose with my index finger, as if keeping a great secret. “You have the practical test this afternoon, don’t you? For the promotion to Senior Auror...”

Tonks blinked. “How did you know that?”

I grinned, feeling a little flirtatious. It was always this way at the beginning, being a teenager again and overloaded with hormones. It wasn’t a bad thing – I liked it even. There were never enough moments to enjoy, and apples and white roses were two of the nicest things in the world.

“That’s not the question you should be asking,” I said.

“No?”

“No.” I flashed what I thought was a charming, rakish smile. “The question you should be asking me is how I know about the heart-shaped birthmark you’ve got on the sweet spot of your hip.”

Taking a mental picture of the look on her face, as it was perhaps the sweetest most honest thing I would ever see, I stepped back and pulled my cloak with me, reluctantly giving up apples and roses. I took a few more steps back, completely disappearing.

“Harry?” Tonks whispered, her hand stretching out from within the folds of her own cloak and grasping for mine. “How could you poss— ? Are you there? Harry Potter, you answer me!”

I didn't. I wanted to. I wanted nothing more than to stay with a lost friend from long ago. But it was 09:49 and twelve-seconds. I had places to be, other lost friends to see.

This was the summer where everything would change, after all, and I needed to be ready for when September 1st arrived. There was never, ever, enough time.

I walked a few streets over from Privet Drive and called for the Knight Bus. Next stop, Diagon Alley.

I had a life to save at 10:08 and twelve-seconds.

A/N: Next chapter is written as well, and I'll post it in a moment. After that, it'll probably be a week or two for the next update. Thanks for reading, please review.

joe

Chapter 2 – As You Were

Memory... is an internal rumour.

--George Santayana

I arrived at The Leaky Cauldron at 09:59 and forty-two seconds, according to Dudders' borrowed watch. Right on time – or rather, I think a little bit faster than the last time. No matter. I was getting to the point where knowing the time down to the last second wouldn't make a difference anyway.

The journey from Little Whinging had taken ten minutes and thirty seconds, and I'd planned a little surprise during that time, as I always did, getting ready to put Big D's unused lighter fluid to good use. I had a feeling it would come in handy in about eight minutes and thirty seconds. Just a hunch – who knew the future, after all?

The wizarding pub was practically deserted this time of morning, only a few die hard patrons and Tom the barman, of course. I had shoved my Invisibility Cloak back into my bag, yet that didn't matter. Some people would recognise me, most would be too awed to approach – or too scared. It wouldn't do to be seen with the boy on the top of Voldemort's 'To Kill...' list.

Tapping the bricks with my wand, I opened the way into Diagon Alley and all the sights and sounds therein.

10:00 exactly.

It's funny, and with all the years available to me I've never bothered to check, but I've always wondered what the Alley looks like from above. Surely there must be some sort of concealment magic in place, making it look like just any other part of old London, because pretty much everything for sale or on display out in the street would blow the Statue of Secrecy right out of the water.

Wards, I'd imagine, or runes and a canopy of invisibility... much like the Lost City of Atlantis, but on a smaller and cruder scale.

Diagon Alley had changed after the events of my fifth-year and Fudge's acceptance that Voldemort had returned. The colourful, glittering window displays offering everything from spellbooks to cauldrons, had been covered with large posters of security information produced by the Ministry, as well as scowling photos of known Death Eaters on the loose.

*Most of them near the top of **my** list.*

Cheap and dirty vendors selling all manner of useless crap now lined the once bustling and relatively joyful market street. Everything from Dementor repellent to Dark Lord detergent for a few measly galleons. I was tempted to blast them, oh so tempted to bring ruin and fire and ultimate destruction to their smiling faces and sleazy grins, peddling wares that could get people killed.

But I couldn't, no – I'm just fifteen now, and had to control the basic urges wrought in a world that existed only once upon a time, an hour ago, and in a moment no further away than a heartbeat. A world where you were only as good as your last lie and your last kill, where no game was fun and the wind howled across desolate fields of fiery bones—

I was Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, Hero, Last Guardian of Atlantis, Time Warrior – not some fucking spell-happy animal... I was better than *Voldemort*.

And I am older now, wiser – crueller. I used to have so much mercy, so much compassion. Ha, no angel born in hell, right...

Damn it all.

So here I am at Diagon Alley – always the first stop when I get back because Gringotts is here, and my mountain of gold – considerably increased thanks to the last and final wishes of my godfather.

Rest in peace, Sirius Black – at least one of us can. Bloody Gods and their fine print... Although I will admit, they did deliver exactly what I bargained for – just in weird and unexpected ways.

And I suppose Gods might be too strong of a word, it conjures up images of religion, mayhap pleasant images, and no one has ever worshipped these creatures save on their knees bleeding from their godforsaken eyes – the Old Ones, the Twilit Fae, the Ancients, the Before Folk – call them what you will, they gave me the power to wrap time around my little finger, and that is a strength that must be respected. Though I'm none too happy with how it always turns out.

Motherfuckin' *fine print*... Do you hear my sigh? Oh do you hear me sigh?

I was also left wondering if my immortal soul was a fair price to pay to drink from the chalice of eternity.

Just a nagging thought I sometimes have, that.

Most of the time I can live with it just fine, other times... Well, have you ever had a dream you were so sure was real? A sleepless night where the border between reality and illusion blur and you find that, no matter how fast you run toward the light, the darkness is there before you – there before you, and waiting.

Yeah, I think now you're beginning to understand... only you're not, not really, you can't – but you will, and then wish you couldn't.

Mostly I'm none too happy about it because I end up a whole lot of dead every time – same as everyone else. I've the ability to go back and try to stop the war, to make a difference, but it seems that no matter what I do or how hard I try, events always shape themselves back to the path I travelled long ago, and for the first time.

It may happen in a different way, but *I still lose*. Usually I end up taking a big old bite out of an *Avada Kedavra* sandwich.

And I won't accept that.

I won't accept that the end of the world can't be changed, can't be stopped. There is far too much *goodness* on this planet, too much life and love, for it all to fall at a madman's whim and thirst for *power*. I

knew I had the chance to be loved, and to love in return, and that was worth fighting for if for no other reason than I wanted it.

10:01 and four seconds. Where the hell was I? Time's getting away from me...

And I need a cigarette – one of the only pleasures I manage to hold on to most of the time. From the side pocket on my backpack I removed the pack of ciggies I'd 'borrowed' from Dudley, and his silver Zippo lighter. Lighting one up, I took a deep drag, putting the pack away and slipping the lighter into my pocket.

10:01 and forty-three seconds.

I nearly coughed up a lung on that first drag – always the way. This young and handsome body of mine ain't use to the abuse. I'd be working on that – wizarding cigars were some of the finest in the known world, and were pretty high on my shopping list.

I followed the curving alley down toward Gringotts at a stroll, seemingly taking my sweet time, gazing at all the crap on offer, yet in my head taking every step on the exact second I was supposed to. I puffed on the cigarette sparingly, getting used to the smoke would take time (*what didn't?*), and the white paper slowly burnt down toward the orange filter.

It was 10:03 on the dot when I entered Slugs & Jiggers Apothecary, and that was such a foul smelling and smoke-filled place that the fumes from my half-smoked cigarette went entirely unnoticed as I moved past the barrels of slimy, peeled newt eyes and powdered shrike, under the bundles of owl feathers and snake fangs hanging from the ceiling, and picked up an Erumpent bladder.

My purchase cost four shiny galleons, the last cash I had on me, and just as my watch ticked over 10:05 and thirteen seconds I found myself back out in the thin crowds on Diagon Alley.

Now, for those of you who don't know, an Erumpent is a Class Four African magical beast that looks a lot like a rhinoceros. It has a horn which can pierce almost anything, and its body secretes a fluid

through this horn that explodes upon impact. Yeah, I know, they blow themselves up a lot...

The use of its bladder in potion making is of particular interest, because the spongy, round bulb can hold pretty much any liquid in a sort of a time-delay cocoon. Simply fill the bladder with whatever substance is required, and pop it into the burning cauldron – gently, gently, because it can rupture quite easily – and there you go. Over about two minutes the bladder is dissolved by the heat and the liquid released.

Using one of these you have time to stand well back when adding dangerous ingredients to volatile potions. But – read carefully – they come from Erumpents, and Erumpents explode. Squeeze too hard, drop it by accident, shake it around, and the bloody thing will burst.

As I continued on my timed stroll towards Gringotts, I filled the bladder with Dudley's lighter fluid, expanding the thing to about twice its size and holding it very, very carefully in my left hand.

It was 10:07 and eighteen seconds. I'd almost finished my cigarette.

I left the main strip of stalls and shops behind as I came to the intersection for Knockturn Alley. Just ahead Gringotts rose up magnificently against the clear blue sky, a snow-white marble building towering over all the other shops and burrowing far beneath the earth for miles out of sight, guarding the collective wealth of wizarding Britain.

Just for the record, the goblins and I don't see eye to eye – they don't know that yet, but they will, they will...

And then there she was.

Fleur Delacour coming down the steps of the bank, her blonde hair caught in the sun, flowing out behind her shoulders. And a look on her face that was at the same time carefree yet guarded, beautiful yet cold. Don't ask me to explain that, I don't really know what I mean – its just strawberries and rain, strawberries and rain...

10:07 and forty-three seconds. I knew the time, didn't even need to look at my watch. Less than half a minute to go.

I picked up the pace, determination entering my step, and headed straight for Fleur, cradling the Erumpent bladder under one arm, safe and secure, and scanning the dark and dank entrance to Knockturn Alley, waiting for my first glimpse of the man who would dare to harm her...

And then there he was, as soon as the clock struck 10:08, just fifteen feet away – as always.

Dressed in dark robes, the edge of a hood resting just on his brow, partially concealing his face, he held a wand towards her and in a clear voice that rang across the small square, cried, “*AVADA KEDAVRA!*”

I've lived through more than one heart-stopping moment, and died in a few as well. Heads turned, gasps rang out, and more than one person simply froze as that dreaded curse was uttered for all to see under the cool morning sun in the busiest shopping district of wizarding London. Fleur's eyes had time to widen, and she took half a step back, her hand instinctively heading for her wand...

Yet I was faster, I had already moved.

I had *hurled* my bloated bladder at 10:08, as soon as I'd seen the bastard appear from the shadows of the alley. And just as he began to utter the last few syllables and end her all too innocent life, he got a face full of Erumpent innards, and my lighter fluid bulb exploded inside his hood, splashing liquid all over his face and down the front of his robes.

He staggered back, and his wand went wide – a burst of cold green light shrieked past Fleur on her left, impacting with a deafening bang and a burst of green flames against the guarded doors of Gringotts. Goblin-made, strengthened across centuries, the doors buckled but held, forcing large chunks of iron and marble to slam into the ground as Fleur dived away, hitting the cobblestones all too hard just to my right.

I had drawn my wand but I never needed to use it. Taking a last deep drag on my cigarette I flicked it through the air with my thumb and forefinger, and with the ease of long practice, the burning butt struck Fleur's attacker just on his nose.

Now lighter fluid burns fast and it burns blue – the sparks from my cigarette ignited the fluid doused over the mysterious attacker, and his old and dusty robes erupted in hot and greasy flames. He screamed in surprise and staggered back as I stepped between him and Fleur, offering her my hand and one of those charming smiles I had given Tonks.

"Arry Potter," she whispered, her voice shaking. "What iz—?"

I always forget how beautiful she truly is, every time. Golden-blond hair, sparkling blue eyes and a cold regard masking her innocence that gives me more of a rush than facing down the worst this world has to offer. And it has nothing to do with the Veela in the gorgeous French woman, at all, because I'm immune to that particular charm.

"Hello, Miss Delacour," I said, all confidence and reassurance. The asshole I set on fire won't get his shit together for about thirty seconds, and the Aurors are rushing down the street anyway, wondering just what the hell happened.

Fleur took my hand.

And just like Tonks, as I pulled her to her feet, she stood just a shade taller than me as well. A growth spurt by January, I promise.

"Arry, you—" Her eyes widened looking over my shoulder and I frowned – because that doesn't usually happen.

I turn in time to see the dead eyes of my killer, just as his twisted black blade skewers me like a piece of meat on a kebab stick. The blade enters my lower back on the left, pops my kidney and wreaks all kind of havoc with my intestines before bursting up and out of my stomach.

I grunt, and then I gasp and stagger into Fleur as the sword is *wrenched* sideways and out of me, pretty much hacking me in half.

Now this shouldn't be happening, I thought, as Fleur screams and falls under my useless weight. She hit the ground hard again, and I fell on top of her, no longer able to feel my legs and not quite understanding that I was dying once more all too soon.

I'm lying on top of Fleur, sort of on my side, as my life's blood and my insides pool quite unexpectedly on the old cobblestones of Diagon Alley. I turn over, looking up into the sky, not because I wanted to but because that was the way my weight fell. I must be crushing Fleur, who is screaming in my ear – she sounds far away, and the sun is very bright.

My murderer stands above me, blocking the sun light. He's not human, that much I guess as his grin nearly splits his face in two, revealing rows of sharpened grey fangs, bleeding some sort of yellow puss. His – no, It's – It's eyes are dead, black orbs and the barely passable human façade its wearing shatters entirely, tearing away with a sickening *squelch* and revealing possibly one of the most ugly creatures I've ever encountered.

"Time's up..." It hissed, a forked tongue slipping over its fangs. It's flesh is decayed and bulging-grey, and covered like a road-map with tiny blue and red veins.

I don't know what's happening – this is a first, and firsts aren't supposed to happen to me anymore. I'm in too much pain, too much blinding, vicious pain to figure this out. I'm about to die.

The monster, whatever it is, shrieks louder than Fleur and it poises the blade that had killed me over my prone form. I can feel my heart beating so fast, so sure, pumping my blood out of the gaping wound in my side.

I realise it's not shrieking – but laughing – as it drives the sword through me a second time, straight through the heart.

Did you know that the human heart creates enough pressure when it beats to squirt blood about thirty feet? Yeah, me neither – but let's just say I painted the windows of *Flourish and Blotts* across the street bright red...

Fleur had stopped screaming. Something wet and warm just hit the side of my head, covering my ear. The sword had not only pierced my heart, but had been driven straight through me and into Fleur, and now she lay dying as well, coughing up blood.

My head lolled to the side, resting in the groove of Fleur's shoulder. As the world grew dark I stared down at the slow seconds ticking by on my wrist watch, unable to move anymore. Fleur's hand gripped mine reflexively, squeezing hard, and a small drop of blood has smeared over the screen of the watch.

It was 10:10 and forty-nine seconds when I died.

I hope Fleur died just as quickly.

DAWN

I awoke from the dream – the Dream, the same Dream – and turned to glance out of the window above my bed, as I always did, wanting to catch the first rays of sunlight beaming in on my renewed life.

Only something wasn't right – the Dream was different, and I remembered why. Never have I remembered dying in such clarity. I grasped my stomach just to make sure there was no gaping sword wound...

I was whole. I was alive – I was pissed as all hell.

The last hour had not happened, not yet. It was just starting to happen.

Okay, no, this was different, this was wrong, this was *impossible*.

Something new wanted to play, it seemed. A low growl, vicious and cold, escaped my throat and my hands clenched into hard fists.

Just what was fucking with me now?

A/N: Thanks, folks, hope you like the story. Got BIG PLANS as to where its heading, with a few original twists never before seen in fanfiction (to my knowledge!) Ha, damn disclaimers...

Love Joe

Chapter 3 – Waking Up All Over Again

*If you get up one more time than you fall,
you will make it through.*

--Chinese Proverb

I lay in my bed gazing up at the blue sky through the window, contemplating what had just happened and tapping my fingers thoughtfully against the thin mattress. After a moment I reached over to the bedside table and picked up my glasses.

The skin on the back of my hand, all the way up my arm, was *swirling* and *stretching*. I was definitely back at the beginning – where I'd only been an hour ago. And if my body was still adjusting then that meant the time-travel pain was on its way again all too soon.

I cursed, and fell out of bed onto my shaky legs, taking a deep breath and ignoring the swelling behind my eyes, the itching and the building pressure – all signs of the agony to come – and stumbled out of the room and over to the bathroom.

The green porcelain sink I'd pulled from the wall not one hour ago was whole and unbroken. I looked at myself in the mirror – still young, still *new*, and yet my flesh was moving faster and faster, not just flowing but *racing* across my body. It was unnerving.

And, as it turns out, the least of my worries.

My side and my chest were both itching like mad, and I pulled my pyjama top over my head to get a good look at the skin there, as the pressure began to edge towards painful behind my eyes.

“Aw, no way...” I whispered, gazing at the long, crescent-shaped scar over my heart. The skin was white and raw, as if recently healed. I was willing to bet the new scar matched the curve of the blade that had stabbed me only five minutes ago perfectly...

“Five minutes ago and one bloody hour from now,” I whispered.
“What could do this...?”

Never – absolutely never – have I brought more than my soul and countless hazy memories back with me through time. I have no control over it, none at all – the deal was for another chance, to go back and try again. I should not have the new scar, because it belonged to a future that hadn't happened yet.

Time could not be manipulated this way! Not against me, not like this!

I had no more time to consider it, however – the pain of the Return had caught up with me. I had a few seconds to grab the hand towel and bite down hard before the world exploded in white-hot blinding fire that eclipsed all thought, all memory, all *time*.

I didn't pull the sink from the wall this time – I *tore* that bastard out, and both hot and cold water sprayed up against the Dursleys' tiles and wallpaper. I fell to my knees, and from my knees onto my back, bringing the basin with me.

I lay there twitching for awhile, tired and beaten. This should not have happened again so soon. I regretted that it had to happen at all. Not that I'd rather die and stay dead, but this was becoming... hard.

And each time now the pain was worse, so much worse. Each new time made the previous journey feel pleasant by comparison.

What do they call that feeling?

You know the one... that feeling you get where you're so certain that you've been here before, that all of this has already happened.

Déjà vu, isn't it?

Yes... I wish I had a suitable ironic comment about the absurdity of déjà vu.

I've kind of learned to block it out, if you know what I mean. I live in an almost constant state of déjà vu that more often than not it leaves my head spinning, and takes all the fun out of life. I mean I know, or can give a fairly good guess, concerning what's about to happen next – where's the fun in that?

Things are changing though, and not for the best...

I hate this war.

After a few minutes spent twitching on the floral floor mats in the bathroom I managed to gain my feet, and through the jets of water spraying up in front of the mirror I got a good look at myself.

My eyes were bleeding.

Twin rivers of blood had run down from both my eyes, like tear drops, cutting over my cheeks and over the corner of my lips. Well, that settled it, I was really angry now. And I looked frightening enough to back that anger up. Still, I dipped my hands into the jets of water and dabbed the blood away, wincing a little as my eyes were sore. I don't know why – maybe the strain of time-travel popped a few blood vessels or something – but they hurt like all hell.

I cleaned myself up as best I could. After all, I was due to speak with Tonks, apples and roses, in about twelve minutes. I took a deep breath, calmed my shaking nerves.

The creature that had killed me should not have been where it had been, and the wound it had given me, especially through the heart, should not have left a scar in the past... I was out of my depth here – most of this time-travelling business was beyond me. I could work it, survive the trip, but knowing exactly *how* it worked, what laws had to be obeyed and what laws could be broken... well I was in the dark there.

"It went for me specifically," I mumbled, heading back across the landing to get dressed and on with the day, again. "It got Fleur too, but only because I was in the way..."

The man I had set on fire, that had been trying to kill Fleur, had been doing so for reasons completely unrelated to and, quite frankly, *smaller* than my newest concern.

"Damn it all," I cursed, slipping on the same pair of jeans I had died in not so long ago, and in about half an hour from now.

Think, Harry, work this out... you've died in worse ways.

"But I've never kept the scars before." I sat down on the edge of the bed, pulling on a pair of socks and my running shoes. In about a minute I'd go and 'borrow' Dudley's watch again, and then go and see Tonks. That was how things were supposed to work. The new scar on my chest felt raw and sore.

"Okay, figure it out... a bad guy, something very ugly, wanted you dead – and did a good job of that. Why? It knew you'd be in Diagon Alley when you were – was it watching you?"

All of this had something to do with time, with Time, of that I could be certain. I don't always remember everything when I'm brought back to this summer, after my fifth-year, but I would not have forgotten a creature such as the one that had shoved a sword through my heart and Fleur.

"*Tempus fugit...*" I whispered, thinking dark thoughts that made all kinds of terrible sense. "Time flies... time, time, time..."

My sighs and my memories are spread like so many ashes across the echoing wastelands of time, at End World beyond the light-blasted plains of Oblivica.

I could only conclude, based on my shiny new scar, that I had brought something back into this world with me. Brought something back through the tear in time and reality created when I died... Some *nightmare* had followed me back, to now, to this time – and for the first time, after all my new beginnings... it had shown itself, all during the last hour that hadn't happened yet.

"Why now...?"

I've done this so many times, failed the world so many times, fallen to enemies old and new, why now does this beast rear its ugly head? And why does it want me dead? I mean, I only end up back here – so why?

But that question didn't really matter to me, not really, because this time I'd be ready for it. I hadn't used magic last time because I could

still be tracked by the Ministry – but now I wanted some answers, and I could outfox the Ministry long enough to get the Trace spell removed at a later date, even if I had to expose myself prematurely.

Maybe that was the anger talking a little, but I liked what it had to say. I was Harry Potter, and not to be trifled with by some two-bit monster with a rather pointy sword.

It was 09:43 when I stepped outside the house, my school bag slung over my shoulder. I scanned Privet Drive carefully, in no way trusting the world, and stepped across the lawn, hopping over the low hedge and garden wall.

Red car, I thought, leaning back against the wall and gripped with a feeling of *déjà vu* so intense I couldn't ignore it.

A few seconds later a red sedan drove past, startling Mrs. Figg's cat out from under a nearby parked car, which darted around the paving stone Tonks stood upon, under her cloak, and leapt over the wall, disappearing into the wilted hedgerow. I waited for the police siren in the distance a handful of seconds later, and then cleared my throat.

"I know you're there," I said, glancing yet again at the paving stone where I knew Tonks would be. "Not going to say hello, Tonks?"

There was a sharp intake of breath and the rustle of invisible fabric, and the air moved around me as Tonks took a few steps closer. Apples and white roses washed over me, clean and clear – and calming.

"Harry," my Order of the Phoenix guardian whispered furiously. "How did you know it was me? Wait a minute – you just guessed! It could have been anyone, even Mundungus, you knew someone would be here."

"Sure I did," I replied, playing my part whilst glancing up and down the street, and more importantly over my shoulder. The scar over my heart was *itching* like mad, and it hurt to scratch – raw and tender. Why can't my scars ever just be scars?

At 09:45 and twenty-eight seconds, when I could be sure no one was watching save Tonks, I grabbed my Invisibility Cloak from my bag and slipped it over the two of us.

“Harry!” she said.

“Don’t worry, no one saw me but you – and at least this way no one will see me having a conversation with thin air.”

No arguing with that. “Just don’t wander off,” Tonks said. “I’m here to keep an eye on you.”

“Nothing better to do with your time?” I quipped. “Like what you see?” My tone was lighter, more flirtatious, than I felt. “Although you can’t keep an eye on me when I’m all invisible like this.” I lifted up the front of her cloak, pushing it back over her bubblegum-pink hair.

I couldn’t help the shiver that rushed up my arm as I brushed the side of her face – warm and soft, and always, above all else, there were the *apples* and *roses*.

I remember standing here not so long ago now, and thinking how I had watched this woman die three years ago... Time’s time, isn’t it? Whatever that means. I always remember the bad memories a helluva lot more clearly than the good. I guess I’m not right in the head, but I was far too old to honestly care about that...

I shook my head – untangling the memories of Then and Now. I was only fifteen, not that old at all.

“This is cosy,” I said, as I did before. *You look a little pale, Harry.*

Tons grinned. “You look a little pale, Harry, are you feeling okay?”

“Just thinking about things, Tonks... bad memories.” *Like watching you die.* I savoured her scent – I think my sense of smell may be the most powerful sense I have – and her apples and roses left me spinning, all the time. “I’ve missed you.”

Last time I hadn’t meant to say that out loud – this time it felt like it fit.

“Ha, well I’ve missed you too,” she replied, bemused but smiling. Her hair faded a moment later to dull, lifeless brown. “I miss him, too.”

Ah, Sirius, just one more tombstone sinking into the sea of blood, aren’t you? I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I wish I could undo the past, but I’m beginning to believe that’s just a fool’s wish...

“And you’ve also got big bags under your eyes, Harry Potter,” Tonks continued, trying to lighten the mood. “Not sleeping?”

“Sleeping just fine,” I lied, wondering what would happen to my eyes if I was forced to travel back again. I have no control over the time-travel – it happens when I die, if Voldemort is still alive, and when the world ends always around my twenty-fourth birthday. The journey had forced them to bleed this last time, I wonder how many more trips it would take for them to *burst*?

I guess the human body wasn’t supposed to be accelerated beyond the speed of light, especially twice in the course of an hour. Oh well... I’ll burn that bridge to the ground when I come to it.

“Liar, liar,” Tonks whispered, pursing her lips in that way that made me want to kiss them – to grab her around the waist and pull her close, her lips against mine and *tasting* those apples and roses. I don’t doubt she’d hex me into the next life if I tried, but it would almost be worth it because I’d wake up an hour ago, possibly in time to have my eyes explode... but it would be worth it. I’ve died for reasons a lot worse and none as near as pleasurable.

“Don’t say it.” *Say what?*

I glanced at my watch. 09:47 and thirty seconds.

“Say what?”

“Ask me where I’m going, I can’t tell you.”

Tonks arched an eyebrow, and as before her hair turned an inquisitive lime green. “Oh, really? Wherever you go I’m supposed to follow at a discreet distance.”

“Can’t keep your eyes off me, huh,” I said, changing things up a little from the last time. “Or is it to make sure evil doesn’t attack?”

Tonks grinned and rolled her eyes. The danced from blue to brown to bright yellow. Ah, the things I could teach her – *will* teach her – about being a Metamorphmagus. She had barely scratched the surface of her abilities.

“I’ll take the latter,” she said. “It is one of the roles of a protective guardian, you know.”

I nodded with a smile – it was time to get moving. I had an appointment with a monster who was a little stab-happy, and I did not want to be late for Fleur’s murder.

“So where are you going, Harry Potter, the Chosen One?”

I’d burn the *Daily Prophet* to the ground if I could get away with it – but it wasn’t high on my to-do list. I was thinking more that I would have to disappear, and fast, if this creature turned up again. I don’t like change, I’m a little afraid of it, and this monster, whatever it was, had disrupted plans I’d put into place time and time again... *It had changed history, future-history, that hadn’t happened yet.*

Oh yes, despite Tonks’ calming presence, and those wonderful roses, I was still quite pissed.

“You read the papers then? I’m off to save the wizarding world... speaking of which: *Potete trovarli con Janus antico, sotto i eaves di Latium perso.*”

Tonks smiled and frowned, poking her tongue out a little. “Harry, was that Italian?”

I quickly grabbed parchment and pen from my bag and scribbled down what I had just said, as I did last time. It was Italian, a code of sorts. One that ensured that, later in the summer, Tonks had the best chance of finding me. It didn’t always work, but sometimes I had to put a little faith in what people call *destiny*. I handed her the parchment. Destiny maybe, but I think when it comes to the past, to

memory, and to the hopes of the future, we all stack the deck as best we can – and my little note was the Ace of Hearts.

“Potete trovarli con Janus antico, sotto i eaves do Latium perso. Please remember, and hold onto this, it’s important.”

“Well okay. I didn’t know you could speak another language. What are you saying?”

I winked and tapped the side of my nose with my finger, as if hiding a great secret. I suppose I was in a way – perhaps the greatest and best kept secret of all time. It was going to be a busy summer. “You have the practical exam today, don’t you, Tonks? For the promotion to Senior Auror.”

Tonks blinked. “How did you know that?”

I sighed and shook my head slowly, all too tempted to reach out and cup the side of her soft face. I didn’t – I was still only a boy to her, just little Harry Potter who needed to be looked after because the big bad Dark Lord was coming to huff, and to puff, and to *Avada Kedavra* the house down...

I grinned, thinking back and ahead along thin golden cords of time, of cause and effect. I was just as lost as anyone, really, perhaps more than most...

“That’s not the question you should be asking,” I said.

“No?”

“No.” I flashed what I thought was a charming, rakish smile. I think it actually looked a little sad, a little lonely – mostly in the bloodshot eyes. No matter. “The question you should be asking is how I know about the heart-shaped birthmark you’ve got on the sweet spot of your hip.”

God bless that honest, surprised expression on her face. Again, it would be worth dying and worth the pain of starting again just to see it once more.

Not this time. I took quick steps back, disappearing under my cloak before she could grab me and wring my scrawny neck.

Away I went, to save a life, to battle a monster, to begin my war.

This is my life – and it ain't a song for the broken-hearted. It's now or never, I ain't gonna live for ever—

I'll stop there, you get the point.

Every time I Wake Up it hurts a little more. Ha, a lot more. The Dream is the same, always the same, but the pain gets worse. Will I have to suffer it again, before this will be over? I always hope that maybe this is the time, the right Time, but it never is...

I can't imagine a worse hell than that – that part of my life – but I suppose the monster that stabbed me and precious Fleur had to have come from somewhere. Hell was a name as fitting as any, for the dark space between Then and Now, within the Dream.

Hell – why not – because I've never seen Heaven in what I have to do. Just madmen and demons... in whose dark company I do not feel out of place.

It was 10:05 and fifteen-seconds when I exited *Slugs & Jiggers Apothecary*, an Erumpent bladder cradled under my arm, and a half-smoked cigarette hanging from the corner of my mouth. I was roughly on time, give or take a few seconds, and I set off down the road towards Gringotts, pouring Dudley's lighter fluid once more into the potions bladder as I went.

My nerves were on edge, but I held an outward appearance of calm that I was proud of. More than a little paranoid, however, I scanned every face I past and that past me, wondering if a monster with grey, veiny flesh and sharp, decayed fangs was hiding behind the normal human faces around me. I wonder how many folks have to worry about that on a daily basis? Me, myself, and I – to name all but a few, I guess.

At 10:07 and forty-three seconds I saw Fleur Delacour for the first time that day – past lives don't count, they don't exist, they should not leave scars – and knew that in the next two minutes I was either going to die, she was going to die, or I was going to make a big old mess of Diagon Alley.

She looked just as great, just as cruelly beautiful as the last time, and all the times before... I hadn't forgotten how beautiful she was this time. No, not at all. Tonks was apples and white roses and all kinds of lovely, Fleur was strawberries and fresh rainfall and all kinds of perfect...

Curse the burden of choice, I thought.

I grabbed my wand out of my back pocket, holding the loaded Erumpent bladder with my throwing arm, just in case. I had come from the future, more than once, back to right now, and yet I had no idea what was going to happen in the next minute. I knew what was supposed to happen, but a sword hacking me in two, piercing my heart, had opened my mind to the possibility that things might not go as planned...

Almost time – ha, time.

The man hiding in the folds of his dusty black robes, the Death Eater intending to kill Fleur, emerged from the shadows under the eaves of Knockturn Alley, his wand raised and aimed straight at the French beauty as she alighted down the cool marble steps of Gringotts.

It was 10:08, just a moment in time, just a small moment in a big old world...

“AVADA KEDAVRA!”

I was ready for this part, even as Fleur reached for her wand on pure instinct and the crowds of shoppers froze, I was ready and faster. Indeed I had already moved. My bloated bladder spiralled through the air and erupted in a burst of greasy lighter fluid against the face of the hooded man.

His wand went wide, and the curse whooshed past Fleur and struck the ornate gilded doors of Gringotts just behind her, which buckled under the magic and large chunks of burning iron and marble slammed into the ground as she dived away.

I was a hero again.

And just like last time I flicked the butt of my dwindling cigarette through the air – straight into the face of her attacker. His skin and robes ignited with swift, sure blue fire. He screamed, dropped his wand, and fell to the ground, batting at the flames.

Fleur's mysterious assailant was down for the count once more. I won't pretend I don't feel a little satisfaction every time I burn the arsehole, but that's just my dark side peeking through the chaos...

And I had bigger problems than my sadistic nature, didn't I?

I was supposed to be dead in about forty-five seconds. Last time I had helped Fleur to her small feet with a charming smile – this time I wasn't nearly as chivalrous, ignoring her entirely and taking a step back from the scene, wand at the ready, awaiting my own mysterious assailant.

Where are you, you ugly bastard?

"Arry Potter," Fleur said, rising to her feet by herself. "What iz—? You saved me!"

There was no one around, no one within striking distance or carrying a sword with a four-foot blade. Just the crowds that had ducked and dived out of the way during the attempt on Fleur's life, the Aurors rushing down the street to take control of the situation, and the man in flames on the cobblestones over by Knockturn Alley.

Nothing – no one, no *thing*.

"Hello, Miss Delacour," I said, looking everywhere but at her. My wand shook in my hand, power burning through the wood. I was ready to unleash hell. "Are you okay?"

And there it was – or rather, there was *something*. Not a monster with a sword, but something that was just as out of place. Hanging in the air in the middle of the square, between Fleur and myself, was a... *gap*. Just in the air, about three feet off the ground, a thin slit of *nothing*, a tear in the fabric of reality, right where I expected a sword-wielding monster to be standing.

I took a few steps closer, having absolutely no idea what it was.

“I am fine, ‘Arry,” Fleur said, gazing at me pale and shaken. Her eyes kept jumping from the bank doors to the man only now managing to get the flames burning away his face under control. Her blouse had been torn in the fall, along her right arm. Her skin was grazed and bleeding.

“Do you see this?” I asked her, gesturing at the gap in the air, and also keeping a look out over my shoulder for any surprise attacks.

“See what?”

It was about a hand’s span wide, and the edges shone dark blue, as fierce as lightning. I reached out my hand and *touched* it, just on the edge. It cut through the skin on the tip of my index finger cleanly, and a bright line of blood ran down to my palm. I wisely took a step back.

Still, I was intrigued. I looked into the heart of the thing, whatever it was, and saw nothing but darkness. I felt cold – freezing, even. Chilled to the bone. I gazed into this abyss, into this *wound*, that should not have been there, and I felt hypnotised by the damn thing.

No good can come of this, I thought. And then, as an afterthought soon forgotten: *This is the end of the game*.

“‘Arry, see what?”

I had been distracted – entranced – and didn’t see Fleur move until it was too late. She stepped across the cobblestones, closing the distance between us, and walked *right through* the long rip in the air that had just so efficiently cut my finger open.

I gasped, and jerked forward to pull her out of the way, fearing that she'd be cut in two or something much worse.

Fleur stepped through the breach in the air, straight through the gap in what I could only assume was reality, and emerged whole and unmarked. Her beautiful face was in front of mine, concerned and still a little scared, but whole and showing no sign that she had even seen, let alone felt, the darkness she had just walked through.

Where was my godforsaken murderer?

“Arry?”

“I... um...” I cleared my throat. “Hi, Fleur.”

She grinned, and her face lightened. “You’ve already said ‘ello once.”

“Did I? You’ve got me all unnerved, standing so close and looking so good.”

Fleur laughed and her eyes sparkled, just as the Aurors arrived.

“What happened?” the man in front said, his wand drawn and pointing at anything that moved. His younger partner was doing the same, her eyes widening when she recognised me.

“I waz attacked by this man,” Fleur said, stepping forward and gesturing to the smoking figure moaning and groaning next to Knockturn Alley. His visible flesh – face and hands – was a mess of blisters and burnt flakes of skin. He had been crawling towards his wand. “He used ze Killing Curse, az you can see eet missed. *Merde eet waz close!*”

And that was one thing I loved about Fleur – that I found so gosh darn cute. Whenever she was angry, or got all worked up, her accent took over and made her damn near impossible to understand.

“*Stupefy*,” the lead Auror said, and a jet of crimson light hit Fleur’s attacker – he slumped to the ground, blissfully unconscious. “Bind him, Bryson. Right, we’ll take him into custody now, Miss...?”

“Fleur Izabelle Delacour.”

“Miss Delacour,” the Auror said, as his partner proceeded to bind the man. “It’s okay now – we’ve got him.”

I suspected the man might have been more than a little bit under the influence of Fleur’s Veela charm, as he puffed out his chest and rested what I supposed was a comforting hand on her shoulder. I’ve never been a jealous man. Was it a tad violent to want to snap his hand off? Probably.

“We’ll need you to make a statement as soon as possible, down at the Ministry. Until then I’ll take down your residence and floo address, and we’ll be in touch.”

“Very well.”

The Auror conjured a parchment and used the tip of his wand to jot down the address Fleur recited. “Date of birth?” he asked.

“Ze fifteenth of November, 1977.”

“Okay, thank you. We’ll need to see you sometime today.”

“I will be zere this afternoon.”

“Perfect – now, did you witness the incident Mr...?”

He had noticed me – and there I was thinking he only had eyes for Fleur. Still glancing around, keeping an eye out for monsters with pointy blades and such, I stepped up next to Fleur, making sure I was clear of the *tear* in the air behind me. It hadn’t hurt Fleur, yet it was fairly obvious that she hadn’t been able to see it. I could definitely see it, and my finger was stinging from its razor-sharp edge.

“Potter, Harry Potter,” I said, and watched the man do a double-take, his eyes shooting for my forehead. “Yes, that Harry Potter – and, no, I’m not available for children’s parties.”

“Er... you witnessed this man attack, Miss Delacour? You would testify to that in a court of law?”

"I sure would," I agreed, nodding enthusiastically whilst expecting a sword through the gut at any moment. It looked as if my monster was a no-show however. How... disappointing?

"Cody," the other Auror, Bryson, said from the entrance to Knockturn Alley. "This one's got a Dark Mark. He's a Death Eater."

"Ah, Merlin..." Auror Cody replied, glancing at my forehead again, and then over to Fleur. She returned his gaze coolly, a single eyebrow raised. He caught himself staring and looked away, a blush rising in his cheeks. "We can't keep this quiet, Mr. Potter," he said, "but you and Miss Delacour might want to leave while you can, before the *Prophet* arrives at least. We'll need your formal statement by the end of the day, however."

I nodded, not in the mood for Rita Skeeter or any of her associates. I already made enough news for the papers, with plenty more on the way after the summer I had planned. "And you shall have it – Level Two, Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I'll swing by after lunch." I wouldn't be in the country after lunch, but Auror Cody wasn't to know that.

He bought it – I was Harry Potter, after all, the Chosen one – and after nodding to me and smiling at Fleur, he slipped away to join his partner as the crowds, sensing the danger had past, milled in close to get a better look. A lot of them were staring at me, most of them with recognition in their eyes.

"I was heading to Gringotts, Fleur," I said, turning to her. She and I were almost the same height, I think I noticed that the last time, before I was killed, but I wasn't so sure about that. Either way, she was a fraction taller and a lot prettier, but I was due a growth spurt by January – promise, set your watch by it – and once I could grow a bit of stubble on my cheeks and stopped looking like a surprised kid, I could even pull off ruggedly handsome. I like to think I can, anyway.

"I've just come from there," Fleur replied. "I was on my morning break, heading for coffee, when ze attack... why would this man attack me?"

"Because you're auditing the Death Eater vaults," I said, without thinking, gazing at the strip in the air that only I could see. I was half-

entranced again, and it took my mind a moment to replay what I'd just said. How was I to know that's what she was doing? She looked at me, her eyes uncertain and her lips quivering. No taking it back now – I must've been really distracted to let something slip like that. "The Ministry under Scrimgeour is putting pressure on the goblins to see it done, and they're passing the buck back to us – to you - so as not to ruffle Voldemort's feathers. Goblins are... sneaky bastards."

"Arry, how could you know—?"

"It's what happened last time, during the last war," I said, which was true. "A lot of the wizarding staff at Gringotts became targets for messing with Voldemort's finances."

"Oh... I see." She didn't, not really. I had postponed her questions though.

"So... heading to Gringotts, if you'd like to come with me?"

"I am due back, yes," Fleur replied, placing her hand on my shoulder. "Thank you, Arry, for saving me." She kissed me on one cheek and then the other.

Dear Merlin, strawberries can make my head spin...

"Ah," I managed, my cheeks tingling from her kisses. "Ah, for you, Fleur, I'd duel the Dark Lord himself."

She laughed – I had broken through her cool regard, it seemed. I often thought that her haughtiness, and her penchant for being overly dismissive, was more of a cover than anything else, hiding the true part-Veela beneath. I paused, having never actually thought that, it was one of those hazy thoughts that belonged to the future. I grasped at it...

I had first met Fleur, first spoken to her, that night the Goblet of Fire had spat my name out. She hadn't believed me, just like most, when I denied having put my name in it. And during that year she had always remained aloof. We only ever shared polite, brief conversation. But I had saved her sister Gabrielle during the Second Task, and had seen more than the cool, haughty exterior she showed the world to mask

how alone she could be, how different the part of her that was Veela made her feel.

I think Fleur herself knew how intimidating she could be – especially to men, and most women saw her as a threat. She was stunning, completely and utterly breathtaking. A lot of women could be jealous over that, and how hard or rewarding would it be to have a conversation with a man that was practically drooling at the sight of you?

My thoughts trailed away... I was attracted to Fleur, but I also admired her in a way that only an outsider like herself could. We had both never fit in, and never would – not in this world, in this time.

“You duel Dark Lords whether I am there or not, no?”

I grinned, still gazing at the hole in the air. It was smaller now – less. I watched it dwindle, fade away... Whatever it was, and however it was created, it was being undone. The razor-sharp blue edge had dulled, and the gap pulled itself closed like the zip on a pair of jeans. I stepped forward with Fleur towards Gringotts, waving my hand through the air before me.

There was nothing there.

“Dark Lords, Death Eaters, Dragons, Dementors... give me something that wants to kill me starting with the letter ‘D’ and I’ll give it my best shot.”

Fleur laughed again. “Are you trying to impress me with your heroism, ‘Arry?”

I kept a steady eye out for any monsters looking to kill me, but there was nothing, and I got the feeling there wouldn’t be anything today. But I doubted that I had seen the last of whatever it was that had sent me back to the beginning. I had the scar over my heart as a sore reminder to sleep with one eye open, at the very least.

I offered Fleur my arm and she took it as we stepped up and through the chunks of rubble and debris that had been blasted from the large doors of Gringotts. The goblins were only now beginning to clear the

way, having thrown the buckled doors wide open so their customers could come and go. They were arguing amongst themselves in their harsh tongue and glaring at the man the Aurors held unconscious between them across the street.

“Impress you? No, no, I’m far too shy for that.” I paused. “Were you impressed?”

Fleur smiled. Have I mentioned how radiant she is? How *hot*? “Oui,” she said, and kissed my cheek again as we entered the wizarding bank.

It was 10:17 and forty-two seconds. I was alive, I was in good health, there was a beautiful French witch on my arm, and I had a small withdrawal to make.

A/N: *What's your best guess for the next update? Let me know in a review, along with your opinion of this new story. Not much happening yet, but rest assured we're just getting warmed up.*

Chapter 4 – War, Or Something Like It

Fear... is forward. No one is afraid of yesterday.

--Adler

Not much could be said for goblins – save perhaps that their nation, spread across every continent in the world, had more gold hoarded and more gold in circulation than the next ten biggest nations, magical or not, combined. And that wasn't counting the sheer amount of stockpiled gold guarded in the three dozen or so Gringotts branches scattered across the globe.

No, that gold did not belong to the goblins – it was wizarding gold – yet the goblins turned a healthy profit from running the magical banking system, and who is to say that, at any point, they wouldn't just turn their impressive security systems against the humans who often treated them with disdain, with open cruelty, and bankrupt the wizarding world in one perfectly vicious move? What was in place to stop them ravaging a worldwide economy?

Nothing.

In fact I'd seen it happen more than once, as the war reached its boiling point and it became fairly clear that the wizarding world, that magical folk, had doomed themselves and the rest of humanity to a very dark future indeed. The goblin nation would turn, as it always did, to rebellion and their own self interest.

And who could blame them, really? With the world falling apart around you, your society tearing itself apart and breaking away into cruel warring factions, wouldn't you cling to what you knew best?

And for the goblins that is gold.

I would be depriving them of my fair amount all too soon, and before the Order, specifically old meddlesome Dumbledore, Merlin damn his good intentions, caught up with me. Tonks, bless her gorgeous heart, would have already been obliged to inform the Order that I had absconded into the invisible night, as it were.

I entered Gringotts over the rubble of my whole Erumpent-bladder-to-the-face plan, Fleur Delacour's arm linked through my own, and the pressure of her lips still buzzing on my cheek. We came to the next set of silver doors and were bowed through by a pair of goblins wearing the scarlet and gold uniform of the bank, and entered the vast marble hall beyond.

It was still early in the morning, barely half-ten, yet the business of the day was well underway as about a hundred more goblins seated behind their high counters on either side of the hall served their wizarding customers, weighing out gold and precious stones on brass scales, and leading them back and forth through the dozens of various doors around the hall.

"I must return to work, 'Arry," Fleur said, attempting to disengage her arm from mine. "My break waz over five minutes ago."

"Stay a moment, won't you," I replied, wondering how best to go about what I needed to do. I had vague memories of being here before, sometimes – most times, actually – without Fleur. I was a lot more brazen this Time around in regards to my female companions. Perhaps I'd finally learnt to anticipate just how little time I had, all things considered.

And I'd definitely learnt the hard way, more than once, that all work and no play made Harry a merciless bastard. Was that a bad thing, sometimes, in my world? Maybe yes, maybe no – most likely somewhere in between, in the details, alongside the Devil and his dancing demon entourage.

What time was it? 10:21 and fifteen seconds. There was something about to happen, I thought, but for the life of me—

"Fleur," a familiar voice said from nearby. "And Harry..."

"lo, Bill," I said to Bill Weasley, who had appeared through a pair of the many doors leading away from the main hall. Was Fleur's arm tightening through mine? Her stance next to me became guarded, her expression unreadable.

"William," Fleur said coolly, raising her chin. I half-expected to see frost spread across Bill's dark robes.

There was an uncomfortable silence in which Bill glared openly at Fleur's arm through mine before he caught himself, shaking his head. "It's good to see you."

"Yes," Fleur replied, as I nodded along.

"Who are you here with, Harry?" Bill asked, glancing around the bank. "Is mum or dad around? Ron and Hermione?" He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Order guardians?"

"Actually I cut the cord there, Bill," I said. "I wasn't here with anyone until I bumped into Fleur outside."

"Really? I'd heard there was some commotion, some curse damage, the goblins sent me up to have a look—"

"I waz attacked," Fleur said. "*Eet* waz nothing 'Arry could not handle."

"Attacked! What happened?"

"Death Eater, set him on fire, felt good, Aurors took over..." I ticked off the points of the last ten minutes with my free hand. "And oh yeah," I said, raising my thumb lucky last to make five, "no one stabbed me through the heart. Good day so far."

Bill was stroking his chin, looking from me to Fleur and then back to me. "Don't know if you, of all people, should be out on your own, Harry. Does Dumbledore know?"

"By now," I replied with a shrug. "Yeah, he probably does. No doubt the fuss and bother is just warming up over at H.Q."

"And he iz not alone," Fleur said, again with a frosty regard for Bill Weasley. "'Arry iz with me."

Bill frowned, and an ugly sneer passed over his face. "Shouldn't you be at work now, Fleur?" he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"After the events of zis morning I think my time at Gringotts may be done with, William," she replied, and I could tell Fleur was serious, even if she did look as though the idea had just popped into her head right then. "My English iz fine now, no? There iz no reason for me to stay in England and push paper around."

Bill's face reddened and he shrugged. "No reason at all," he replied, biting off each word and spitting it in her face.

Another of those heavy silences fell and I stood there tapping my foot against the marble, reaching for a smile. "Well... this is awkward. Perhaps I'll just go and see a gob—"

"I will accompany you," Fleur said, pulling my arm and turning me away. "Goodbye, William."

I looked back over my shoulder as Fleur pulled me away towards the high marble counters with their goblin tellers and caught Bill red-faced and scowling at the pair of us, before he stormed away toward the damaged doors at the front of the bank.

"I am done wiz Bill Weasley," Fleur said, swiping her hand down through the air. A high blush, cool spots of anger, had settled in her cheeks and she glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. "I am sorry, 'Arry, that would 'ave been... uncomfortable for you."

I shrugged. "You and Bill...?"

"We had something once, and *then* he wanted more than I waz willing to give at ze time. That was some weeks ago now, months, and I will not look back again."

"Oh." Had I known that Bill was going to show up when he did? Maybe yes, maybe no. What time was it? 10:28 and sixteen seconds. I made a note of that, couldn't say why, just felt that I should. Time's time, and all the rest is those brief seconds between one moment and the next where the magic happens. "So, you're finished with Gringotts?"

"I believe so, yes," Fleur said, looking grateful for the smooth change of subject I'd just delivered. "After today, and ze attack! *Merde*, this war is real, no."

"Very, very real," I said, taking a deep breath. "Bad guys and everything..."

Fleur blushed again, yet it was warmer and her eyes softer than they had been with Bill. "But of course, I don't need to tell you about ze war..."

I laughed. *Fleur, my dear, the real war has yet to begin... and I'm already half a dozen steps behind Voldemort – but I'm playing catch up now.* More often than not I reckon only other people can bring out the best in us human folk, and Fleur was doing that for me now. What I had to do, what I was *about* to do was all the brighter for having her with me.

"What will you do instead of working here?" I asked, knowing already.

"Back to France and back home, 'Arry. It is where ze heart is, no?"

"Oh forever and always," I agreed, squeezing her hand and meeting her eyes as we approached one of the goblin tellers. "Tell me, Fleur, if I could get you out of here today, without having to work a month's notice, would you want that?"

Fleur's brow furrowed, a cute line forming between her eyes as we reached the counter. "Oui," she said. "Yes."

I gave her a smile and then turned to the curious goblin, who had undoubtedly recognised my infamous scar. There was no smile on my face at this point – I had my game face firmly in place.

"May I help you, Mr. Pot—" the goblin began, his long face drawn down in a sneer.

"I'm here to see the manager," I said, quite cheerfully, interrupting the teller. "About matters most important and profitable."

The goblin shifted in his scarlet uniform. "I'm sorry, but Manager Forst is unavailable at this time. Perhaps if you were to make an appointment he could accommodate you—" His grin widened revealing two rows of yellow fangs. "—later in the year."

I tried to look crestfallen, to look like the fifteen year old teenager I was. "Ah, are you sure?"

The goblin nodded sharply, all but ready to dismiss me. "If there is any other enquiry I can be of serv—"

I cut the wee little thing short again, my hard eyes blazing and my voice strong and sure. "I invoke the right of Palaver with Chief Forst the Overseer, Director-Manager of the London Branch of Gringotts Wizarding Bank. Under the laws of your nation, of your father's father, goblin, I, Harry James Potter, invoke the *Treaty of Atlantis* and all rights owed Wizard-kind therein. *I claim the Claw of Ragnarok unbroken!*"

I was shouting by the end of that, and every goblin within hearing distance of me stopped what they were doing. Several of the tellers dropped the galleons and gems they were sorting and gaped at me, hissing low in their throats. The goblin I was dealing with had eyes as wide as saucers, and his mouth worked soundlessly even as his clawed fingers dug furrows into the very marble before him.

I couldn't blame them. I could only pity them.

I had just uttered words of goblin law kept secret by the sneaky little bastards for over three thousand years. I couldn't have shocked them more if I'd gone and declared war against them – and in a way I had.

Merlin damn it all, in a way I had....

Through my eyes the world was burning – I wonder how many people see it, see just how fragile this whole mess of a society is... Hell, a good gust of wind could knock the legs out from under it – and Voldemort was a fucking cyclone, an oncoming storm.

I was too – and my fury was greater.

Do you think the window burns to light the way back home? A light that warms no matter where we go? What if we were to fall by someone's wicked way...? Still that window burns, time so slowly turns...

Damn it all, I was reminiscing again.

I was beginning to feel as if it would never be over, not for me – I was beginning to feel as if that was par for the course when Fate blocked all the exits, and long lost legends began to claw their way out of a shallow, watery grave.

Being Harry Potter meant being awake in the dead of night, ready and willing to silence the shadows creeping over the threshold of civilisation.

And would it never be over?

Maybe yes, maybe no – probably somewhere in between.

Déjà vu, right?

I stood before a large golden-framed window on the top most floor of Gringotts, gazing out at Diagon Alley below and the milling crowds of shoppers working their way up and down the street, more or less oblivious to the slow shadow settling over the entire world. Fleur stood next to me, uncertain and wanting to ask me questions I couldn't answer, not yet.

I was in the finely furnished office of the Director of Gringotts, Goblin Forst Overseer. The goblin clerk who had tried to dismiss me only ten minutes ago had led both Fleur and myself up through the many levels of the bank, and through the use of a private staircase to this office. There was a long mahogany desk and many shelves of parchment, loose document cabinets and a dark leather couch. Twin globes of light, of a soft blue, shone from the ceiling.

The highway's jammed with broken heroes, I thought, for no particular reason. I had a lot of memories tumbling through my head,

both old and new, and even through all of that Fleur's faint scent of strawberries and fresh rainfall was distracting me – in a good way, the best way.

The doors to the office were thrown open and a tall goblin, about half my height, stormed into the room dressed in a long black suit with silver trim and large galleon-sized cufflinks. He wore on his head a powdered wig reminiscent of a Muggle courtroom, and a thin staff of dark metal thumped on the hardwood floors every other step.

Forst Overseer was glaring pure and unguarded hate at me.

An entourage of five further goblins followed – four of them were armed with drawn swords that were as shiny and gem-encrusted as the blade belonging to Godric Gryffindor. The fifth and final goblin carried a velvet cushion in both of his hands, and upon it was a clear glass sphere ringed with a loop of gold about the size of a Quaffle.

I heard Fleur gasp beside me and she took a step back towards the window, positioning herself behind me.

"Harry Potter." Forst snarled, his thin fingers clenching the staff he carried as if attempting to break it in two. "The Boy Who Lived himself. As of this moment, in accordance with Goblin Law, of which you know more than you should, more than can be allowed, and in view of five or more high-witnesses, I place you under the *Bane of Discordia*."

Ah, they went straight for the big guns this time, I thought, smiling politely at the bank manager. "Sounds ominous," I said into the silence following Forst's proclamation. "But before I'm hung, drawn and quartered, I would like to discuss a business proposition with you, Mr Overseer – one the goblin nation cannot afford to ignore."

"Arry," Fleur whispered, her hand tightening around my upper arm. "What are you doing here?"

"No Man or Goblin has been sentenced to the pain under *Discordia* in over four centuries, Mr. Potter," Forst replied. "You do not understand the seriousness of your situation."

His armoured goblin buddies, their swords held confidently before them, were ready to strike if I so much as took a step forward, or made a move for the wand in my back pocket. What use would I have for the stick of wood anyway? True magic, magic beyond words of old Latin, magic that could transcend *time itself*, was firmly in my grasp.

“With all due respect, *goblin*, it is you and your kind that fail to grasp the seriousness of my situation,” I replied, and the room around me seemed to dim. The twin globes of blue light shone just as brightly, but their light was pale, useless. Even the sunlight streaming in through the large window was swallowed, devoured, in the pall of darkness that turned my eyes to sharp points of emerald and gave me an air of *tremendous* strength.

Was it illusion? Intimidation? Maybe yes and maybe no. There are many types of power, and they could all corrupt.

“Arry...” Fleur whispered again.

“Now that I have your attention, Forst,” I continued, as light flooded back into the room and an all too agreeable smile spread across my face, “I would like to remind you that I am here claiming the protection of *Atlantis* and the unbroken *Claw of Ragnarok*. You’ve so far set much standard by the traditions of your nation, as this death squad clearly demonstrates, yet here you violate the oldest precepts of your kind?”

Forst’s eyes widened with every word, and at the mention of Atlantis and Ragnarok he flinched as if I’d struck him. His stature seemed diminished by the time I was done, and his staff sunk in his grasp, almost hitting the polished floor. The other goblins exchanged anxious and hesitant glances with each other.

“What is it you want, wizard?” Forst asked after a heavy moment. “How do you know of our hidden lore?”

“What I want isn’t as important as what I can give you – return to you, Forst.” I turned and smiled at Fleur, and led us both over to the smooth leather couch underneath the window. Taking a seat, I lounged in the sofa under an air of disregard for the death sentence just levelled on my head.

“Speak, Potter!” Forst hissed. “You knew enough to know we could not let you leave today... unless, unless...” Goblins were ugly not stupid, and I had a feeling Forst was beginning to understand just what I could offer.

“As I’ve said, I have a proposition for you, if you’d care to listen.” As an afterthought, I added: “And go down in history as the goblin that restored the lost riches of Atlantis to your already considerable treasure hoard.”

A little flattery went a long way sometimes – catch more goblins with honey, and so on...

“More than one fool wizard has assumed the quest for mythical Atlantis over the long centuries, Mr Potter,” Forst said, taking a seat at his own large desk. He began to tap his long fingernails against the wood, irritating me in a way that made me want to twitch. “None have ever found it – what makes you think it even exists?”

An innocent enough question, you would think. I didn’t. The scowl that washed the fake smile from my face was so fast and so sure that the goblin bank manager leaned back in his seat, unnerved.

“No,” I said.

“No?”

“I am here, in your house, under the pain of death even though the truce of *Ragnarok’s Claw* has protected all such wizarding ambassadors for over three thousand years against such a sentence. Granted, I am the first to claim such protection in three millennia, yet you have forgotten those that sired you, Forst Overseer.”

I was not a teenager at this point, not even an adult – I was something more, something *different*. I was the Time Warrior, neither young nor old, a title bestowed upon me by angry and vengeful gods that were laughing behind my back as they gave me the power to wrap Time around my little finger. And damn it all, goblins pissed me off to no end...

Again, Forst's demeanour seemed diminished by the time I was through. He had stormed into his office all swords and death sentences and I'd set him firmly in his place. My knowledge of archaic goblin law was as hazy as most of my future memories, yet I had set foot on Atlantis – on the Lost Isle, where gods and demons had battled at the end of the ancient world – and doomed utopia to depths unknown.

I was the power in this room.

I didn't even know it was possible for the blood to drain from the face of a cold-blooded creature, yet the Director-Manager of Gringotts, London, was looking mighty pale at the moment.

"You have no idea what you have done today, do you, Mr Potter?"

I had a very good idea – baby, I've been here before – but I let the goblin have his say.

"Laws unspoken since the Great Cataclysm... Goblin honour and lore denied, all called into question. You know what it would mean for the goblin nation should your knowledge become public? It would mean war, war and rebellion and all manner of profitless destruction – and all for one wizard, one boy, who has come across information better left lost to the winds of time..."

"You even brought the *Shackles of Lar*," I said, gesturing to the goblin supporting the glass sphere on the velvet pillow. It was really a glorified pair of handcuffs – only a lot more *biting*. Goblin blood activated the sphere, made it malleable, which could then be settled over a pair of bound hands before it hardened and began to eat away at the flesh. Cruelty knows no restraint, when it comes to torture.

"I am not surprised you know of *Lar's Doom*, also."

I inclined my head, taking that as a compliment. "Do you extend the protection of *Ragnarok* unbroken, Mr Overseer? To myself and Miss Fleur Delacour?"

Not that it really mattered, but this was a grand moment in the history of Wizard-Goblin relations. Not once in the last three thousands years

had the words spoken here today, in the heart of London, been uttered. And even when they were common knowledge, such drastic invocations were rarely used...

As a representative and Overseer of his nation, Forst could grant the protection – he could not deny it or else forfeit his house to me, hand over the keys to Gringotts and all spoils therein – and I could commit bloody murder under his roof and escape all punishment. Diplomatic immunity at its most extreme, part of a deal made between goblins and humanity at a time when no one could imagine either nation falling apart at the seams. Only they had, all at the same time – Atlantis had been the bolt that held the world together, and when it was lost...

“Granted,” Forst said, snarling at the word as if it were a noose for his neck. “The *Claw of Ragnarok* passes unbroken to Harry James Potter for this day only, and within the House of Gringotts, London. The *Bane of Discordia* is revoked under the *Claw*. You may leave,” he said, speaking to the armed guard that still looked ready to give me a really short haircut.

The five goblins filed out of the room silently, never taking their eyes from me, and the double doors closed with a click behind them. I turned back to Forst, rubbing my hands together and eager to be underway.

“Unless you are hiding the Crown of Gringott himself in that bag of yours, Mr Potter, as well as the Five Rubies of Arcadia and the Golden Sceptre of Amun-Ra, then I think what I’ve just done may mean the headsman for me and all in my direct line.”

“Fear not,” I said. He was right, of course, the other goblins were going to kill him for honouring the lost lore of Atlantis, a nation and utopian city they had spent millennia convincing mankind did not truly exist. Forst was doomed if I was bluffing about all the lost treasure. Luckily for him, I was as good as my word. “Shall we dispense with the formalities and get down to business?”

“Indeed – with the *Claw* granted I have the right to request that you explain your presence in my house, wizard, do I not?”

I nodded. “Yes, of course. I am here because I’m planning an expedition to recover the treasure of the lost city of Atlantis – I swear by blood and by magic, on my father’s name, that is why I have come.”

“And you seek goblin aid, why?” Forst’s eyes narrowed. “You require gold for this *expedition*. You want Gringotts to fund you, a boy—”

“Nope – I’ve enough gold in my vault here to see it through. With the inclusion of the late Sirius Black’s accounts, I believe my personal fortune to be sitting comfortably at around four hundred and fifty thousand galleons. A nice sum, not overly bloated, but plenty to be getting on with.”

Forst eyed me speculatively for a moment. He had discarded his pompous staff, yet the powdered wig remained firmly in place on top of his spotted head. “Then why are you here? Do you seek goblin aid at all?”

“Indeed I do – and I believe it only fair that if my expedition proves successful, then the goblins should reclaim what was lost to them all those long years ago.” I could bullshit with the best of them – I’d screw over the ugly little critters first chance I got. Right now though, right now they could help me. “There was more gold, and more ancient relics, lost when Atlantis disappeared than in all the Gringotts vaults the world over.”

“And what makes you think you can recover this mythical treasure, Mr Potter?” Forst asked, yet I had certainly grasped his interest.

“I have certain information, certain... sources. Is it not enough that I know of the *Treaty of Atlantis*, of *Ragnarok’s Claw*? Does that not satisfy you?”

“Information is power – and what you know places a dagger at the throat of every goblin in the world. I cannot guarantee your safety outside of these walls. Indeed, I believe letting you leave will mean my death and a bounty on your head large enough to make you a target throughout the known world.”

I tapped the tips of my fingers together, glancing at Fleur. She was watching my exchange with the goblin bank manager incredulously, as if unable to believe just what she was hearing. I gave her a smile, a genuine one, which she struggled to return. Her hands were shaking in her lap – and her blouse was still torn where she'd fallen in the street outside. Soon enough I'd be able to do magic to fix that.

"Unless I'm telling the truth about Atlantis, which is something that you can't ignore considering the knowledge I have, is it, Forst? No I think you and your superiors are going to give me a month or two to actually make good on my promise before calling a hunt for my head."

"Don't be so sure..." Forst shook his head. "What do you want, Harry Potter? For all the riches of the ancient world, what are you asking for in return?"

"Four things, actually – and weighed against more wealth than you can honestly imagine, they are quite reasonable. I want just one simple trinket, one simple transaction, one simple favour, and one simple Portkey."

"How reasonable." Forst blinked. "Well, we'll see... the trinket?"

"I've been led to believe that here at this very bank, stored in your personal vaults no less, Mr Overseer, is a Ring of Concealment – a gold band capable of masking a wizard's magical signature. A rare trinket and of a coincidental make, wouldn't you say? And useless to goblin-kind, yet of great use to me in evading the Trace set upon me by the Ministry of Magic."

Forst again seemed taken aback – for the same reason as before, because I was displaying knowledge about goblins, and about Gringotts, that I simply should not have had. That no human, magical or not, should even be aware of.

It was coming up for 11:00 – this negotiation always sapped the better part of my first day back. At least I had it down to what appeared to be a fine art, working as I was off hazy memories and feeling my way along paths of conversation and intimidation that just

felt right. I was unclear for the most part just what the hell I had in my head – turns out its some pretty heavy stuff.

“Trinket, indeed,” the goblin scoffed, grimacing – no, that was a goblin smiling, which anyone can tell you is never a good thing. “Powers of the ancient world notwithstanding, Mr Potter, to provide you with such concealment would breach maybe seven or eight clauses of modern day underage sorcery law. The times, they are precarious enough, hmm, without bringing the weight of the Ministry down upon us.”

I could work with that. “Of course, the ring would only be a loan until say, my seventeenth birthday just over a year from now – and recompense for its use to the sum of say, fifty thousand galleons, and payable today? Do we understand one another, Mr Overseer?”

Forst’s eyes gleamed as I offered him fifty thousand pieces of gold for a ring that had been gathering dust in the goblin vaults for centuries on end. It was bait far too tempting to pass up, and being so generous also led weight to my claims on the expedition, as well as built up a trust that had kind of collapsed when the little goblins had sentenced me to death ten minutes ago.

“You know, don’t you? That the Ring of Concealment is of Atlantean make... of course you know.”

I nodded, no sense in denying that. “I know a great many things – it impresses my friends, confuses my enemies, and delights small house-elves. The hallmark on the ring, the eternity symbol – magic old and wise shaped the ring some thirty-five hundred years ago. My how time flies...”

I couldn’t let the creature see how important the ring was to my plans – I didn’t really know how important, but I got the feeling that without the ring, I was going to Wake Up again at Privet Drive all too soon. It did more than just conceal one’s magical signature.

The ring is a Key to the Past, I thought, and hid a grimace as a sharp bolt of raw pain pinched the back of my eyes. It hurt like all hell, and I stopped thinking along those lines.

“In this, at least, I believe we understand one another, Mr Potter. I shall have the ring retrieved from storage – please be aware it may take some time, a half-hour, for it to arrive.”

I smiled. “Ah, more than enough time to discuss other matters of importance.”

Forst removed a black-feathered quill from the stand on his desk and scratched a hasty note on a fine piece of parchment before him. Satisfied when it had dried, he placed the note in a small tray on his desk where it promptly folded itself into a tiny paper bird with small flapping wings, and took off through a small hole above the goblins door.

“Now how else can the goblins of Gringotts assist you on your treasure hunt, Mr Potter?”

“Just a few small matters, a few things – I have the trinket, now onto the transaction. Fairly standard, this request, you do it most days for those venturing into the Muggle world. I require documents – a passport, Muggle bank accounts, international driver’s licence, certificate of birth and such in a name *other* than Harry Potter.”

“False identification? A simple matter – there is more?”

“Currency conversation. I would like one hundred thousand galleons converted into Muggle cash of various denominations. Twenty-five thousand galleons each of British, French, Italian, and American Muggle money – and put it in one of those fancy suitcases I’ve seen your fellows walking around with.”

“Arry, are you mad?” Fleur whispered furiously in my ear. “I cannot believe what I am hearing today...”

“A Ring of Concealment, currency and documents of safe passage through the Muggle world... Forgive me, Mr Potter, but it appears as though you wish to disappear.”

“What better way to find something that’s lost, than to become lost yourself, Mr Overseer? Oh, and chuck in a bag of about three hundred galleons – just in case.”

Forst nodded. "What you are requesting is a function normally processed by Gringotts regardless – I assume you want this done as soon as possible?"

"If my shiny new documents could arrive with the Atlantean ring, well that would be splendid."

"Indeed..." Forst began to scribble on another piece of parchment, and soon enough a second little bird was fluttering out of the gap above his door. "The gold, including the loan fees for the ring, will be removed from your vault immediately. That is two of your four requests, Mr Potter – the third was a favour, the fourth a Portkey."

"A favour, yes," I said, glancing at Fleur. "Miss Delacour is currently an employee of your bank, Mr Overseer. Due to the neutral, more profitable stance you goblins have taken in the wizarding war against Lord Voldemort, the task of auditing Death Eater accounts fell to her—"

"Arry...?"

"—and just this morning an attempt on her life was made because of your cowardice—" Forst snarled. "Oh forgive me, your profitable neutrality. The favour, *goblin*," I all but growled, "is that you terminate her employment effective immediately, no strings attached, and she walks out of here with me today no longer an employee of your proud, neutral establishment."

Forst blinked. "Is that what you wish, Miss Delacour?" he asked Fleur. "Your work has always been of a high standard, and there are many opportunities within Gringotts for one such as yourself, both here and overseas—"

"*Eet iz* what I wish, Mr Overseer," Fleur said, giving me a look of pure amazement as all the pieces of that morning's plan fell into place.

I suppose I was doing pretty good so far this morning, all things considered. My throat was a little dry from all the bullshitting, but I was nearly done now.

"Very well then. And the Portkey, Mr Potter?"

“Sydney, Australia. The hunt for Atlantis begins there...”

If nothing else is left, one must scream.

And Time wounds all heels... brings all things to pass. How could I kill Time without wounding eternity?

I find it kind of funny, and I find it kind of sad, that the world needs kids to save it. There's something terribly wrong with the universe, with fate, and if there were no tomorrow I reckon that would sit well with a lot of folks.

My name is Harry Potter, and I can bring Time to its knees.

And I'm Harry, just Harry.

And lions are just lions, heroes are just heroes... Gods are just Gods.

It was 11:47 and thirty-three seconds when Fleur and I finally left Gringotts and began to walk up the street toward the Leaky Cauldron, working our way through the crowds – the alley was a lot busier this late in the morning. Thankfully no one was paying particular attention to me or my scar. I scanned every face that we past, however, not taking any chances with a demon that seemed as competent at time manipulation as I was.

At least I was out of that damned bank.

Merlin, it had taken over a bloody hour to persuade the little bastards to part with their treasure. Still, mission accomplished – I turned the dull golden ring on my left index finger with my thumb, and felt the magic pulsing through my body from that hand, disrupting my magical signature and making the Ministry's Trace spell all but useless.

The Ring of Concealment, a relic of long, lost Atlantis – or so the goblins believed. It was a familiar weight on my finger, and fit as if it had been sized for me all those years ago...

In my other hand I carried a fancy black briefcase with silver trim, and within it were all the documents I'd need to make my way through the Muggle world, as well as close to one million pounds in various world currencies – British, American, French, and Italian – and strapped to my jeans around the waist was a small sack of galleons. Both the briefcase and the sack were bigger on the inside than out, and charmed feather-light.

“Well that waz unexpected, ‘Arry,” Fleur said, finding her voice.

“Je suis plein de surprises, ma chérie,” I replied, in perfect, fluent French. *I am full of surprises, sweetheart.*

Fleur stopped in her tracks, staring at me as if I'd grown a second head, or revealed a secret greater than the location of Atlantis. *“Tu parles français?” You speak French?*

“Oui, Fleur.”

“Effectivement!” Surprises, indeed!

I took her hand and pulled her to a stop just outside of the *Magical Menagerie*. *“J’ai quelque chose à te demander, Fleur.” I have something to ask you, Fleur.*

“Oui...?”

I switched back to English – speaking French felt like riding a bike for the first time in years. You never forgot how, but there was always the chance you were going to go flying over the handlebars. That said, I'd never owned a push bike. No matter. “What do you say to an afternoon of shopping back home where the heart is? Paris? Or even Provence?

Fleur seemed taken aback. She took a moment to playback what I'd said, making sure she understood. “‘Arry, today? Now? But I thought ze Portkey was for Sydney—”

“Ah yes, that.” There was a cage of toads in buckets hopping about out the front of the menagerie, and I removed the Portkey – a simple eagle-feather quill – that the goblins had programmed for Australia,

and charged me seventy-five galleons for, and dropped it through the bars. “Bit of a red herring, really – the goblins will be tracking me, in fact they are already awaiting my arrival in Australia.”

One of the toads hopped onto the quill.

“*Portus Activus*,” I whispered, and the little toad squeezed out of existence, already halfway across the face of the earth and heading for the warm and sunny climate of the southern hemisphere. Second thoughts, it would be rainy down there at the moment. “Have to stay one step ahead, and if that means lunch and shopping with a beautiful women on a gorgeous French afternoon... well?”

Fleur smiled. “*Etonnant et charmant, Harry Potter.*” she said. *Surprising and charming.*

“I can Apparate internationally or even create a Portkey if you prefer, Fleur. I’m sure today has raised a lot of questions you’d like answered – and I’m enjoying your company. Last time I saw you would have been...”

“After ze Tournament,” she said quietly.

“Yeah... what do you say? Two old Champions catching up – I’d love to see France.”

I found it odd that I didn’t remember the Tri-Wizard Tournament straight off the top of my head – there were a lot more memories than usual trying to sort themselves into some sort of workable timeline in my mind. Things were different, that much was certain, and I had no idea what it meant for me, and this whole time-travelling business.

“What you said about Atlantis, ‘Arry, the goblins believed you... was it all true?” Fleur asked.

True? The truth is a terrible weapon – remember that – people can lie and kill for the truth. Ah, I felt older than I was. There was adventure on the high wind, and I could see the sun setting on a distant future that never was, and that could be. He who dares wins, right? He who dares... will know the truth.

“Peut-être que oui, peut-être que non...” I said, with a near-silent sigh. *Maybe yes, maybe no...*

And with that Fleur came to a decision – was it the right one? It had been before, for the most part, time would only tell if it would be again. “Well, if that iz the case, then I would like to ‘ear more about it,” she said, bless her heart.

A/N: *So how was it? I get the feeling I’m rushing the story, so I’m going to take a step back and update – for really this time – in at least a week, give it time to simmer. Thanks for the awesome response so far, folks, let me know what you think in a review!*

Captain Joe

A/N: *(20/02/08) Thank you to those who actually speak French, and pointed out my errors - I've corrected it on faith because I'm fairly sure the translation software I used was a little off... Forgive me for butchering a beautiful language. Thank you to **TheSilentMan** and **Mrcgh**.*

Chapter 5 – Remind Me What I Could Have Been

Fate is not an eagle, it creeps like a rat.

--Bowen

The Canal du Midi is the oldest working canal in the world, and was built just over three hundred years ago in the south of France, running for over two hundred kilometres through some of the oldest regions of the country. A beautiful and tranquil waterway, the Canal connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea.

Whether travelling by barge or narrow boat, walking or cycling along its length, the Canal stretches through some of the richest and most beautiful parts of the country. On average about ten metres wide and two metres deep, the Canal du Midi displaces some seven million cubic metres of earth and rock, and a complicated system of feeder canals and reservoirs keep it flowing the year round.

Fleur and I were enjoying lunch under the warm summer sun, drifting along the Canal du Midi past old vineyards and gentle rolling hills on a canal boat named the *Rose Blanche*, the White Rose. Idyllic, distant mountains dominated the horizon, and long sweeping valleys crept between them, full of apple trees and crops of honeydew melon.

In the end it was Fleur that had Apparated us across the English Channel and over the border into France. I was a little out of practice when it came to Apparation, especially side-along travel, and my fifteen (nearly sixteen) year old body had never done such a thing at all. I'd need some practice on my own to bring my magic up to speed – and that always hurt like all hell, because although I knew *how* to do it, my body was in no fit shape to perform. That first time was going to be a killer.

"I did not expect today, 'Arry," Fleur said, pulling my eyes away from the countryside. We sat at a table for two on the sixty-foot canal boat, a few other couples and tourist families sat nearby, though none close enough to overhear our conversation.

"Well, we can never know the future, can we?" I replied.

There had been no hiccups getting into the country. The International Apparation Terminal that scooped up all travellers arriving internationally, whether they wanted to be scooped up or not, as wards set up around the border redirected all Apparaters there, had even issued me with a two-month travel visa into the country.

My documents from Gringotts, Muggle documents, were of the highest, fraudulent quality, and the Ring of Concealment I wore on my left hand had masked my magical signature enough that I didn't register as Harry Potter, British magical citizen, but as an Ethan Rafe, of whom no record previously existed, as Ethan Rafe had never been overseas in his life. And if Ethan looked a little young for the eighteen his birth certificate said, well his magical signature checked out, so stamp him on through.

Fleur had been born and raised in France, and as such bypassed most of the security checks – save the one on her own magical signature, which only served to verify her as Miss Fleur Isabelle Delacour regardless. As I had known she would, she didn't raise an eyebrow as Harry Potter so easily entered the country illegally. It had been that sort of morning, after all.

"You are a mystery to me, 'Arry, ever since I first met you before ze fireplace after ze Tournament was drawn."

"I thought that you, Krum, and Cedric all looked the part of a Champion that night, standing in the glow of the fire," I said. "Things were different back then."

Memories of Then and Now, of Before and After, danced through my head. I had a bit of a headache. Nothing too fierce, yet constant, and beating a steady throb just between my eyes. I was beginning to wonder if having every particle and atom in my body accelerated beyond the speed of light, my soul torn from my older self and merged into my younger self eight years in the past or sooner, might be doing some lasting damage...

"You were ze Champion in the end though, no," Fleur said, idly turning a piece of string pasta in green parsley sauce around her silver fork. "After what 'appened in zat graveyard."

I took a sip of crisp white wine from my thin crystal glass, savouring the taste. I hadn't eaten in days, really, and had died twice in those days. And where I'd come from in the future such luxuries as white wine, and food in general, had been scarce – read nonexistent. So much so that the bodies lying in the mass graves around the major cities didn't even have enough meat on them to please the vultures and the carrion eaters. Slim pickins'

Merlin damn it all, there were dark days ahead, and never enough time to prepare.

"You heard about all that then?" I said, meaning the nightmare of Voldemort's rebirth.

"*Oui...* it is fast becoming a legendary tale, 'Arry, after your Ministry finally accepted ze return of You Know Who a few weeks ago. A boy, only fourteen, duels a wizard that inspires such fear – it is a story of hope."

I shrugged – maybe yes and maybe no to hope – before topping off my wine glass with the bottle from the silver ice bucket on the edge of the table. I hovered over Fleur's glass until she gave me a nod.

"Of the hope/less maybe," I said. "And call him Voldemort, it's just a name."

"Voldemort," she said after moment, a visible shiver running through her entire body. "It is a terrible name, no, for a terrible man."

"He's more monster than man – there's very little human left, Fleur, in the Dark Lord."

"Well, here's to hoping that I will never 'ave to see for myself." She raised the glass to her lips and took a long sip of wine.

"Oh Merlin willing," I replied, finding a smile. "This is a lovely spot, by the way. From the sooty air of London to a tranquil canal in the south of France – it has been a good day."

“Except for ze attempt on my life,” Fleur said, pushing her plate to one side and sitting up straight in her chair, the perfect picture of elegance and etiquette. “I’m glad you were there to save ze day.”

I was kind of slouching in my chair, with one elbow resting on the table. Not so much elegance as sloth, especially in my old shirt and jeans. Fleur looked stunning in her floral blouse and dark skirt, complete with knee-high boots of white leather. I definitely didn’t look the part of the hero, or much of anything really. Way too scruffy to be seen with a girl as beautiful as Fleur, yet she did not seem to care.

There was so much more to her than met the eye.

“The day wouldn’t have been half as bright without you in it, Fleur, I’m glad I was there, too,” I said, because it seemed like the right thing to say. I’d been here before, on this canal, eating this pasta and drinking this wine – how many times? I don’t know, at least one too many. Damn it all.

“Yet you seem troubled and distant. Most men cannot tear zere eyes away from me, ‘Arry, yet you are only ‘alf-here, I theenk. You see what I mean when I say you are a mystery. What iz ‘Arry Potter thinking right now?”

Her accent was peaking through the cultured English. I guess she was half-annoyed, half-amused with me. After all I hadn’t even bothered to explain much of what had been said and done at Gringotts that morning, nor made any mention of Atlantis or how I had known the laws and lore of an ancient goblin nation that had been hidden for over three thousand years.

What could I tell her? The truth? More often than not people want to hear honest lies over a dark truth. I had no memories of ever sharing my time-travelling secret with Fleur, with anyone, and I suppose there was good reason to that...

And I was ignoring her a little, though trying hard not too. I was keeping an eye out for demons with pointy swords, and trying to make sense of the thousands of misplaced memories in my head that were aching like a sore tooth. It was 12:32 and fifty four seconds, according to my cheap wristwatch, yet Time was an hour ahead here

in France. 13:33, then – I didn't get the feeling that we were approaching any moment of particular importance, as we floated down this old and weary canal.

"I'm just thinking about where to go from here," I said. "And that I look far too worn and scruffy to be sitting here with you."

Fleur gave me a dazzling smile – warm in that cold, indifferent way she could turn her head, and stunning in that cruel way she could make my heart race. "*Oui*, you are scruffy, 'Arry, especially your 'air, but it is cute."

"Cute?" I said, running a hand back through my unruly hair. "See, this is why I need you to come shopping with me this afternoon – if I'm going to fight Dark Lords and Death Eaters, then I need to pull off angry and intimidating, brooding and wise. I need to look older and scarier. You know, *wizardly*."

"Yet you are cute, 'Arry, and I'm not sure I want to help destroy that," Fleur said, laughing and taking a sip of her wine. "Looking as young and scruffy as you do adds to *ze* mystery, no. Surely this *iz* not a boy that defies Dark wizards, but a *cute* Quidditch player not five minutes off his broom."

I grinned, and tried to recall the last time I'd played a game of Quidditch. Last year? My *real* last year, my fifth-year at Hogwarts. Had I played Quidditch? I think Umbridge put a stop to it, didn't she? I certainly hadn't played it in those last unrealised years of the future – too much ash and fire in the sky. When was it? I honestly couldn't remember – and my headache felt all the worse for trying.

"So being a young, scruffy mess is something that works for you French girls then?"

Fleur laughed. "But of course, 'Arry. Older men can be controlling sometimes, in my experience, and assume far too much."

Oh, just what were we talking about now? I think I was flirting a little, damn my eager teenage hormones, whereas Fleur was just playing. I was enjoying myself, either way.

“Tell me about it,” I said, thinking of Albus Dumbledore and his good intentions. Merlin keep the old man safe, but damn it all, this war was a young man’s game now. Fleur quirked an eyebrow at me. “Er... I’ll be sixteen in just over a fortnight, you know.” *Plus however many years spent time-travelling between Then and Now...*

“Ah, I am just over two years older than you – any plans for your sixteenth?”

“Well... no. I don’t get out much back home, especially during the summer. Too risky, according to Dumbledore and his Order.”

“You know I ‘ave done some work for Professor Dumbledore and ze Order,” she replied. “Protecting you is a great priority to them. Yet I assume that you ‘ave decided to be more independent, no? Ze Goblins most certainly think so.”

“Ha, the goblins are going to wish they cut my head off this morning all too soon,” I said, running my finger down through the cool, wet chill that had settled on my wine glass.

Be prepared to die.

If you want to live, and if you want to make a difference – God help you if you do, God help you if you can – then be prepared to die.

And be prepared to drag the screaming innocence of humanity down into hell with you. Mercy be done – maybe yes, maybe no.

*And no matter how hard it gets, how fucking impossible, always – **always** – tell yourself that you can do it, that you’ll make it. Even if you know the taste of that bullshit well, you never admit defeat.*

I can think of no better advice than that.

Save run and hide, and try not to fall asleep, less the nightmares of the waking world happen upon you and, with a grumbling stomach, show you what it means to be a ‘hero’ and how so few moments matter at your last.

Was I prepared to die?

Maybe yes, maybe no – but you know the answer, don't you? Of course I wasn't, and that is why I force Time to my own dark ends, time and time again.

Fleur and I departed from the canal boat at the port of Carcassonne, a fortified castle-town home to some fifty thousand people built up and around an elongated hill many centuries ago. An impressive sight, Carcassonne was Fleur's hometown, and her family owned a large manor house on the outskirts of the Cité, pretty much in the French countryside. I had vague memories of being there before, a life or two ago. My first few days back were always pretty much the same.

And it was hard to forget the finest remains of medieval fortifications in all of Europe.

I walked up to the town with Fleur at my side, my bag with the Invisibility Cloak and a half-pack of smokes slung over my shoulder, and my briefcase with the Muggle currency and false documents swinging idly in my left hand. The Ring of Concealment shone dully in the pale afternoon light on my finger.

"That was nice – I have not been on ze Canal du Midi since I was a girl with my father," Fleur said, looking great in the light, her hair trailing out behind her in the breeze.

"The food was good," I said, patting my full stomach. "Nice, light, and I want some more of that apple pie."

"Ah, it waz all pastry and sugar, 'Arry. I should not 'ave 'ad the piece I did."

"We'll have to go again sometime..."

"Peut-être que oui, peut-être que non..." Maybe yes, maybe no. "You were distracted most of ze ride, 'Arry. Thinking of long lost riches, no?" She paused. "Of Atlantis, only fairytales exist, I think."

I gave her a tired and careworn smile that looked too old on my young and cute face. "I've been led to believe its more than myth and legend, but we'll see. The summer holidays are still young, after all."

"You really mean to go on zis expedition of yours?"

"Better than sitting at home dwelling on things I can't change." *People I can't bring back.* "If I do find it, I promise to bring you back all kinds of treasure."

Fleur laughed, light and clear and delighted. "Well zen, perhaps we will ride the Canal on our own private boat, no."

"I wouldn't say no to that."

For the next hour or two Fleur gave me a guided tour of the fortified Cité of Carcassonne. We walked down the old narrow and winding cobblestone streets and past buildings made of brick and marble, coated in creeping vines and dashed with early afternoon sunlight. The air was fresh and the people friendly, and we stopped more than once at half a dozen sweet shops and Muggle specialty stores. All there for the tourists, of which I suppose I was one.

More than one man and even a few women paused as Fleur walked by, or laughed at something I had said, admiring her undeniable beauty. It had been an eventful day so far, spanning hundreds of miles, and the younger part of me, the boy who was only fifteen, marvelled at the fact that only a few short hours ago I had been gutted like a fish, only to awake an hour early in time... Was this really my life now?

I never had enough time, and yet I could hardly consider this afternoon time wasted. And the way I saw it, the universe owed me a pleasant afternoon after all the dying it put me through. At the very least, time with Fleur was a break from— but no, that began to sound too much like a pitiful excuse... I was better than that.

I bought a few new pieces of clothing chosen by Fleur, nothing too much at this point as I didn't want to be weighed down carrying shopping bags of fine clothes, yet she took me into the pricy Muggle shops and I purchased two pairs of jeans, a few shirts, all paid for

with the francs in my briefcase that I had acquired at Gringotts that morning.

There was no sign of the magical world in Carcassonne, and I could not recall if the city had a Diagon Alley equivalent or if it all belonged to the Muggles, yet that didn't matter, as Fleur knew the way around like the back of her hand. This was the town of her childhood.

In a quiet store at the higher end of the town which smelled of new leather and shoe polish, Fleur made me stand to be fitted for a dark Muggle suit and shiny black shoes. The stitching on the inside pocket read *Armani*, and the price tag was in the thousands of dollars, American. Extravagant, of that there was no doubt, yet Fleur insisted.

And I have to confess I do like the way a pair of dark trousers, a silk grey shirt open at the collar, and a suit jacket complete with round silver buttons looked on me. So did Fleur, and I think she appreciated just how much of that 'cuteness' I shed standing on that stool before a set of three mirrors, as the French tailor tightened my shoelaces. I may have been dressed for a black-tie dinner, but damn it all, I'd look good duelling Voldemort in this, and my wand fit snugly in the inner-breast pocket.

I think I'd bought a few suits like this the last few times I'd tried to stop the world from ending, and even a pair of dark sunglasses to replace the thin wire-framed glasses I wore, but that was something to think about in the next few weeks, if I bothered at all. The memories were still spinning and tumbling around my head, caught in the cyclone of time-travel.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked Fleur, who stood to my right as I straightened the cufflinks on my shirt. The tailor had left us to discuss the suit alone, seeing as how it cost somewhere in the region of a hundred billion galleons.

"Muggle fashion is centuries ahead of ze wizarding world, 'Arry," Fleur replied. "You look *fantastiqué* – all you need now is a silk overcoat down past your knees, and not only 'as ze cute been replaced with 'andsome, but ze boy is more of a man, no."

Now, I like to think of myself as a bit of a badass.

I've been forged through enough chaos and destruction to have been tempered unbreakable by the fires of war. I've magic in my arsenal that could tear down cities, reduce forests to ash, mountains to rubble, and – if I feel like going out in a blaze of glory – I can channel enough power through my body to melt a continent...

Armies and monsters, madmen and demons, all had fallen under my strength. I had loved and lost women before, I had memories of such – just memories, and fuzzy ones at that, as if they belonged to someone else – yet when Fleur called me handsome I blushed as red as a Weasley and felt a nervous giggle rising in my throat that belonged to a schoolgirl.

I coughed, and Fleur's reflection in the mirror gave me a subtle smile, noting the blush. "Guess I'll take it then," I said, and Fleur nodded, she had expected no less. Damn it all, women and their manipulative beauty included.

I ended up buying the overcoat Fleur had suggested as well, and with my new purchases in hand, she and I began to walk out of the Cité, talking much about nothing and avoiding the awkward subjects that I could give no real answers to – like Atlantis, and the goblins, and how much different I seemed since last we met at the end of my fourth-year – until we came to the limits of the fortified castle-town, and Fleur side-along Apparated me to her family home built in one of the many meadows surrounding Carcassonne and the Canal du Midi.

Side-along Apparation is uncomfortable, and it tended to make my ears pop, as the sensation of being stretched thin enough to squeeze through a keyhole overtook me. I think that's kind of what happens, when it comes to Apparation – and maybe even time-travel – but Apparation was travel through space, not time, and a lot more common. Either way, being pulled through a point in space about as wide as my little finger left me feeling all tingly and squashed, and I dropped half my shopping on arrival.

We hadn't travelled far, only half a dozen miles or so from Carcassonne.

I stood upon a dusty garden path, just inside the wards that surrounded the Delacours' property, wards that had recognised Fleur

and allowed her to pass, plus guest. All around me were statues and garden ornaments, rose bushes and tall ancient trees swaying gently in the breeze, growing behind a low hedge that ran alongside the path up to the house itself.

It was an old manor house, and had that much loved and well-worn look of being lived in for generations. Green climbing vines claimed the outer walls, bursting with small purple flowers in full bloom, and of the three storeys all but the ground floor had five windows with old white shutters opened wide to fill the house with light.

“I could grow old here,” I said quietly, speaking a stray thought aloud.

Fleur glanced at me, having overheard, and offered me a small enigmatic smile as she helped me collect the shopping bags I’d dropped a moment ago.

“I’d ask you in for a drink, ‘Arry, yet I think you have to be going, no?” Fleur said, as we reached the large mahogany front door. She could read me too well – most women could.

“Places to be,” I said, trying not to sigh. I shifted all of the shopping bags to one hand, my new clothes and shoes. The fancy suit hung in a zip-up dust cover from a coat hanger latched under the strap of my old school bag, dangling down my back. “There’s no place like home.”

And before she could get away, I embraced Fleur with my one free arm. A quick hug in which I was overcome with strawberries and fresh rainfall – from her golden hair, mostly – and her cheek pressed against mine. I felt one of her hands settle on my back, under the bag, and she relaxed into the embrace.

I held her longer than friendship usually allowed, but I was still the first one of us to pull away.

“I will be home for a week or so, I think, until I decide what to do with myself” she said. “Perhaps you can drop in for a visit – say Thursday afternoon for tea, ‘Arry, if you are not busy saving ze wizarding world.”

“Ah, no promises...” I replied, and damn it all, I couldn’t promise. It was all too likely I’d be off saving the world – or trying to, at least. I wasn’t very good at it, when it came right down to crunch time, but if at first you don’t succeed...

Make a deal with the Devil to tear your mortal soul from your body and blast it eight years into the past, to the summer where everything has to change if there is any hope of preventing the carnage.

Dare the path never taken, realise that the end is only ever a new beginning...

If at first you don’t succeed... walk away, no sense in being a damned fool about it.

“You are not going looking for trouble, are you, ‘Arry?” Fleur asked, under that warm afternoon sun. Her tone was light, yet her eyes were worried.

“I never have to go looking,” I replied, rakish smile firmly in place.

“No, I suppose not.” Fleur hesitated, and then leaned down to kiss me on the cheek. Her lips lingered a heartbeat longer than a simple goodbye, and her breath was warm in my ear. “Thank you again, for your heroism this morning, ‘Arry. Take care of yourself, and come visit me soon!”

We said our final goodbyes and Fleur let herself into her big vine-covered home. I got a glimpse of polished hardwood floors and a crystal chandelier hanging from a high ceiling, before she gave me a final smile from within the doorway, and closed the door on creaky old hinges, taking all the strawberries and rainfall with her.

I stood there for a moment under the eaves of the house, thinking happy thoughts about today. Things were always pleasant, back at the start, yet I had the feeling – call it intuition, future-memory – that a lot of things were about to head downhill from here. A pessimistic attitude, maybe, but when you’ve seen the world go to hell in a

handcart as many times as I have, it gets awfully hard to remain optimistic.

I took a stroll down the garden path and over the boundary of Fleur's property before attempting to Apparate. I felt the gentle pull of the minor wards protecting the home as I crossed their border, leaving the garden behind and stepping onto a country road that could take me all the way back to Carcassonne.

I had another destination in mind.

Now there are some things in life that, once learnt, you can never forget – no matter how many times you relive the same eight years trying to avert Armageddon – things like riding a broom, or speaking Italian and French. And magic – I knew the ins and outs of Apparation, I knew how to squeeze myself through that thin little keyhole in space.

I'd already Apparated twice today, piggybacking on Fleur's magic, and it had given me a feel for it again. Enough that I thought I could do it with little hassle – although I had a feeling it was going to hurt, being so out of practice as I was in my fifteen year old body.

I took a deep breath, steadied my shopping bags and that badass suit over my shoulder, and muttered, "Destination... determination... deliberation." The three D's of Apparation.

I felt a tingling in my toes and then, standing in the middle of the road like an idiot, I disappeared from the French countryside without making a sound.

When Fleur and I had Apparated into France we had been redirected to the International Apparation Terminal in Paris, and for the most part Fleur and I, Mr Ethan Rafe, had entered the country legally. Italy had the same wards and charms set up to net incoming international travellers as France did, yet without Fleur I could... fly below the radar, so to speak. I just had to be careful not to set off the wards in place that would alert the Italian Ministry to an illegal border crossing.

It wasn't easy, yet I knew what I was doing, having spent many, many years, scouring the globe covertly for ancient magics and long, lost

cities... I'd picked up a few tricks in my time, and the sheer distance I was attempting to Apparate would also work in my favour.

Most people, most magical folk, can manage somewhere in the region of two hundred miles when Apparating – and that's all good and well, yet even on an off day I could manage closer to a thousand miles. Dumbledore could probably do about five hundred, whereas Voldemort would be closer to me again. I'm not sure, to tell you the truth, of the true extent of Voldemort's magical ability. I've never survived long enough in a fight to the death against him to find out.

Anyways, I was attempting to Apparate from the south of France and into Italy, near to Rome – a distance beyond ninety-nine percent of the general population. My atoms and particles were stretched thin enough to cover such a distance, squeezing through cracks in space and magic, to pass almost undetected through the country's border patrol wards.

Yet I wasn't taking any chances. The goblins, once they realised I wasn't in Australia, would track the documents they had given me through the International Apparation Terminal in Paris, and discover that Ethan Rafe had been given a two-month pass into the country. There could be no record of me leaving, if I was to have any chance of proceeding unhindered.

Having disappeared without making a sound was part of the trick – almost always there's a popping sound as air rushes into the vacuum left in the wake of Apparation – I had disappeared silently, because I was still there. I don't really understand the mechanics of it, but I guess you could say I half-Apparated from France, right up to Italy's border, and waited for a lull in the wards – timing it just right – before slipping through into the country undetected.

I think I've said that time-travel requires an instinctive grasp of time itself, and an understanding of the moments between one second and the next where the magic can happen... Well, I have that understanding.

To my knowledge, there is no one but me who could perform this kind of Apparation. It isn't instantaneous travel, and that's the trick. It's

more like digging a hole under the fence and sneaking in the back door.

I appeared in Tivoli, an ancient Italian town about thirty kilometres from Rome in the Italian Peninsula, and promptly fell to my knees, stifling a scream and scattering my shopping bags as every bone in my body protested to such... *vicious* first-time Apparation.

“Fuck...” I groaned, none too eloquently, as harsh lances of cool pain shot through my joints, froze in my blood, and battered away inside my skull. That bloody headache was killing me.

After about half a minute spent twitching in pain, I rose to my feet and, before anything else, reached over my shoulder for the pack of cigarettes in the side pouch of my backpack. The silver Zippo I’d ‘borrowed’ from Dudley was in my pocket, and I took a deep drag on the smoke with a sigh. I’d been smoking for about five years, back in the future – when you’re starving, and supplies are at their lowest, a stomach full of smoke was better than nothing. It took the edge off, and the addiction was always worth it.

I stood on a lookout built just above the famous Falls of Tivoli – twin waterfalls of the Aniene River cascading over the sheer cliff face below me for over three hundred and fifty feet. A fine mist rose from the swash at the bottom of the falls, and watery drops from the shower clung to my hair and face. It was cool and refreshing.

Third country in as many hours, I thought, walking up to the waist-high limestone wall and looking down over the edge of the waterfall to the distant river below, which wound away out of sight through the town itself.

Tivoli is nestled in a region of Italy known as Lazio. Some thousands of years ago, around about the second millennium B.C., this land had been known by another name – *Latium*.

And Latium had been home to the original Latin people. I took a deep breath, savouring the fresh air. This was an amazing place. The very origins of magical learning had been born along the clear rolling hills, and across the distant mountains cradling endless valleys of cloud and hiding the ancient, lost secrets of Latium.

Below me and behind me stands most of the hill town, built much the same as Carcassonne. Yet whereas Carcassonne is a monument to medieval times, Tivoli is a monument to ancient Rome. Temples from that era survive within the town, as do the old aqueducts. The history and the architecture of the town is among the most impressive in the world to survive from the age of antiquity. I could *feel* the timelessness of this place, of this land, stretching back across the long lost years...

I was uniquely sensitive to it, after all.

Across the Aniene River I could see the port of Tivoli, the fishing boats that ran the river east away from the massive waterfalls, and beyond that the old paper mills that produced some of the finest paper in the world. I'd gotten to know my history, it seemed, as half of these details were coming to me as I swept my eyes over the landscape for what might as well have been the first time.

"Quite an impressive view, is it not?" said a voice to my left.

I turned and glanced at a man standing way too close for comfort.

Dressed in dark robes, his hair cut short and a tuft of facial hair curling around his chin, his sharp eyes, cool and green, regarded me impassively. His eyes gave him away – they were dead. He was standing on one of the shopping bags I'd dropped upon my painful arrival.

I had only one memory of the man – but then, it wasn't a man, was it? This thing must think I'm a fucking idiot...

"Oh I've been waiting for you," I said, drawing my wand from the back pocket of my jeans.

I took a wary step back as the man turned to face me, the hilt of his long sword – a sword that had ended my life that morning – hanging from his waist. He drew it with the same careful ease of which I held my wand.

“Harry Potter, a Warrior of Time,” he said, inclining his head a fraction of an inch. Those dead eyes, void of even a speck of life, never blinked or left my own. “That Time is up...”

Behind me roared the Falls of Tivoli, and the only way off this flat stone lookout on the edge of the Aniene River, a curving path down into town, was blocked by a human-looking creature baring a sword of dark steel.

And oh look, he had a friend. Across the courtyard, only a dozen feet away, stood a second man, who looked identical to the first – right down to the four feet of twisted blade clenched in his fist.

“Do you want to talk about this, boys?” I said, backing up against the limestone safety wall at the cliff’s edge.

“Your betrayal will no longer stand, Potter,” the first man said, levelling his sword at my heart.

Betrayal? What the fu—

My shiny new scar, made of a wound that had followed me through time itself, began to itch across my heart. And then it began to burn, painfully so. Just what the hell was I dealing with?

“You know what will happen should you kill me,” I said, holding my wand steady and ready, locked and loaded. “It’ll just reset the clock.”

Both men grinned and advanced upon me, and their identical grins were wide enough to tear away the face masks they wore. Their human façade stretched and *ripped* around their mouths, revealing not teeth but two rows of vicious grey fangs coated in a slimy yellow puss that oozed from their gums.

“We know...” the creatures hissed as one. “We *desire* it.”

Ah, okay.

“So be it then,” I whispered, and tossed my half smoked cigarette aside.

When backed into a corner, I've been known to do stupid things that could get people killed. Thankfully, it was only my life in danger at the moment.

I turned and leapt up onto the wall, and pausing for not one moment I *hurled* myself over the edge of the cliff and down into the rising mist of the Falls of Tivoli, some four hundred feet above the ground.

I spun in the air whilst I was still level with the lookout and took aim with my wand. I saw surprise in the bulging bloodshot eyes of the monsters trying to kill me, and then lit those eyes up with crimson curse light.

“*REDUCTO!*” I cried over the crashing of the monumental waterfalls, forcing as much power as I could into the spell.

A thick band of red light issued forth from my wand as I fell out of the monsters' sight, and struck the limestone wall before them. There was a loud bang, followed by an explosion of dust and rock as the wall crumbled under the weight of the curse. Twin howls of rage and surprise echoed across the late afternoon sky.

The monsters joined me in my suicidal jump, as the impact of the curse had taken a bite out of the cliff just beneath their feet, along with the wall. A whole section of earth and rock broke away, becoming a deadly barrage of falling stone.

I spun in the air again, diving through the rising mist and fog from the waterfalls as I picked up speed, shooting head first down the length of the massive water curtain. I was soaked through in a heartbeat, my arms held before me in the dive and my wand aimed straight at the ground still far below.

I muttered low and fast under my breath, gripping my wand hard against the wind shear and twirling it in small circles, casting magic I barely understood. Magic that came from somewhere within the tumbling memories surging like a roiling ocean in my head.

My fall began to slow—no, the air began to rush *past* me faster and faster, gathering at the base of the waterfall like a massive pillow. I

began to laugh, realising what I'd just done – this would be fun if I didn't snap my neck!

I hit the cushion of air at the bottom of my fall and it was like hitting a soft feather mattress. A wide feather mattress pulled taught, with enough spring to bounce me right back up again. And that's what happened. It was like sinking into soft nothingness, nothingness which I hit hard enough to slingshot me back the other way.

The surface of the river, a swash of white foam forever churning before the waterfalls, came up pretty fast, and caught in my air pillow I came close enough to the water's surface to take a drink, yet all at once my downward momentum was caught, I hung suspended for a precious moment, and then the recoil from the air cushion expelled me like a bullet from the barrel of a gun *straight back up into the sky*, soaring against the falling water.

I was travelling fast, and broke through the cloudy mist and beheld the blue sky above me, littered with falling chunks of rock and debris from the curse I had fired into the cliff face.

Aw, shit.

I got lucky – none of it struck me, yet where were my two ugly friends? And what was that falling away just to my left? Ha—

"*Accio sword,*" I said, brandishing my wand like a whip towards the falling steel blade. My magic caught it, and the spinning sword came hurtling through the air towards me. I grasped the dark hilt, the handle wrapped in dark leather, in my free left hand, before it cut my head off.

There were two identical shrieks just above me – ah, there we are, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, hovering in the air on thick wings of a near transparent grey membrane, riddled with black veins and ragged holes.

Oh that is not fair, I thought. *That is unfair. That is taking un-fucking-fair to a whole new degree.* Not only did these nightmares look like corpses left out in the sun too long, but they could fly as well.

Tweedledum, the monster *without* its sword, shrieked again, loud enough to make my eardrums shake, and the blade in my hand grew furiously hot, and I could feel it pulling against my grip as my palm blistered. It wanted to return to its master.

No chance, I thought, as my upward velocity carried me amongst the stinking, flapping wings of my foes.

Tweedledee flew through the air towards me, battering me with gusts of fetid air from its heavy wings. It swung its sword at my face, and I brought my stolen blade up to guard. The swords met in mid-air and a fountain of silver sparks erupted between us, followed by an explosion of raw energy, forcing us apart.

Tweedledee spiralled away, shrieking in rage as it was thrown under the massive waterfalls. The sheer pressure of so much water slammed the monster down towards the river far below, and out of sight. I was thrown practically into the waiting arms of Tweedledum.

The creature, whatever it was, wrapped its wings around me and trapped the sword between our bodies. Merlin damn it all, but the bloody thing reeked! All of the upward momentum I had left was drained away, and gravity took back over as I grappled with the creature and it fought to reclaim its sword.

About a million jagged fangs lunged and bit at my face, and two orbs as black as the night, narrowed to thin slits, glared nothing but absolute hate at me.

I still had a hold on the sword, it was in my grasp, and I twisted the blade down on pure instinct, snapping my neck back away from those gnashing fangs and hoping against hope that I didn't cut the hand holding my wand off or something else as I turned the blade. I was rewarded with a shriek of pain from Tweedledum, and its wings opened up enough for me to launch myself back and out of its stinking grasp.

The dark blade shone with a faint red glow, and I saw that I had opened a nasty bleeding wound across Tweedledum's stomach, as once again I began to plummet to an untimely death at the base of the Falls of Tivoli.

Merlin damn it all, was it only fifteen minutes ago that Fleur Delacour had left a lingering kiss on my cheek? That had been pleasant. Time was a relative, fickle thing, and could be all too cruel sometimes – most times.

Down I went again, falling arse first almost folded in half, still gripping my wand and Tweedledum's sword, back into the cloud of rising mist and slamming *hard* into my cushion of air, which was still in place and coated with running water from the falls.

I sunk into the pillow of springy air a second time, and bounced right back out a second time, with just as much force as before. The air cushion shattered beneath me, having been strained beyond breaking point, and a loud, thunderous *clap* roared back up into the heavens alongside me as I ended this fight.

I burst through the mist with Tweedledum's sword pointed straight at the sky. And there was Tweedledum itself, hovering directly overhead about twenty feet away, holding its bleeding stomach. I was travelling fast enough that the bastard thing barely had a second's warning before I returned the 'borrowed' sword, sheathing the glowing dark blade in the creature's flabby-grey chest as I shot on by.

My velocity carried me up and passed Tweedledum, and I turned in the air in time to see a flash of that same crimson light that had been glowing from the sword's blade burst from the fatal wound I had given it, a heartbeat before the creature itself erupted in flames of the darkest blue, and an oily black.

The flames consumed Tweedledum in mere moments, leaving nothing but silver sparks of ash that fell swiftly out of sight, lost within the roaring mist of the Falls. Even the sword had been destroyed.

Unimpeded by monsters this time, my velocity carried me right back up to the top of the cliff. I actually overshot the lookout where I had first arrived only about five minutes ago by about twenty feet, and landed hard on the safe side of the limestone wall – what remained of it – soaking wet and aching from playing the part of a cannonball all too well.

I had no time to catch my breath though, as I had no idea what had become of Tweedledee. That fucker had disappeared under the waterfall, and perhaps several hundred thousand litres of water hammering down on its body had been enough to drown it, but I wasn't taking any chances.

"You still out there, buddy?" I whispered, glaring down over the edge of the cliff. "Maybe yes, maybe no, huh..."

I gave myself a quick check for injuries – nothing but a few scrapes and bruises from wrestling with the damn monsters, and a few minor burns on my left hand from the sword that were already blistering painfully. I'd gotten off light, all things considered, and taught a new adversary that I was no easy meat.

I had a feeling I'd be seeing Tweedledee again, however, if not others like it... just a feeling. This was all messed up with Time, somehow. And I was a shining example that death was only ever the beginning when it came to Time.

Ah Merlin damn it all, wasn't Voldemort and his growing armies enough of a threat without adding new pieces to the board?

After about five minutes, I began to relax and collected my scattered belongings from about the lookout. I'd lost a few of the bags containing my new clothes over the edge of the cliff, but my backpack had survived the fall, and my briefcase containing all my cash and documents, as well as my fancy suit, hadn't been lost, thank heavens for small mercies.

They knew you'd be here, Harry, just like they knew you'd be in Diagon Alley – someone knows your first day back almost as well as you do.

My thoughts were divided, and that damned headache was getting worse right between my eyes. I took a few deep breaths to calm myself. I began to think it would be a good idea to vacate the area – as there was more than a good chance that someone had seen my high-diving antics from lower down the hill.

What next though? Did I stick to the plan?

I gave it a moment's thought and decided that yes, I would proceed as planned. Whatever these creatures were, they could be killed, and I was awfully good at killing. Let them try again, if they dared.

It was 06:79 and ninety-nine seconds. Dudley's crappy old wristwatch wasn't waterproof. Great.

A few shopping bags lighter, I walked away from the commanding view of the twin waterfalls, and began the trek down the hill and into the archaic town of Tivoli, my shoes squelching on every step I took.

If memory served, there was a nice little hotel down by the water, the kind with expensive mints on the pillow and fine cigars for sale at the bar. I fancied some more wine, maybe even a six-pack of beer, and a bucket of ice to dunk my blistering hand in.

I felt as if I deserved it. It had been a long old day, after all.

A/N: Okay, next chapter in the works. Things aren't even warmed up yet in this story – BIG PLANS! Everything about Carcassonne, the Canal du Midi, and Tivoli is all fact – I didn't make any of it up, save maybe a few liberties with the geography, yet they do all exist in the real world.

Thanks for reading, please review,

Joe

Chapter 6 – Yesterday Came Suddenly

God is cruel – sometimes he makes you live.

--King

There's one thing I could never get the hang of – besides putting a stop to Armageddon – and that was treating injuries. I don't know what it is but I can only ever manage a few small healing charms when it comes to patching myself up. Anything deeper or uglier than say a five-inch gash, a flesh wound, and I'm more likely to blast a hole through myself than heal it.

I think I'm more of an offensive, spell-slinging type of guy. You know... spears of chaotic energy, blasts of untameable fury, a fiery rain of death – cool, powerful magic like that.

Power I have, in spades. Or *will* have. Trust me, there's a good story behind that. And channelling that into destructive use, fighting and duelling, is the most natural thing in the world. Directing my magic to carefully knit together burnt and broken skin, mend bones or undo curse damage is not my forte. I guess it's just not *cool* enough for the powers that be.

And as for time-travel – well, you shove enough power into any circuit and it'll overload. My magic could be a little temperamental sometimes, especially after a jaunt back in time where the skills and power of my older self try to fit into the untrained and weaker body of my younger self. It was mostly memory that had trouble fitting into place, yet I had memory of using magic of such strength that I found it hard to accept its reality.

Was it real if I've never used it?

Time wasn't linear, yet for all that matters to most of us bumbling, stumbling humans it may as well be – we go with the flow, and that flow is forward, is *ahead*. That's an incorrect view but one most people have to live with. Time is more of a *web*, you see, with strands spiralling back and forth in forever increasing complexity.

So was the magic I knew in the distant future real? Some of it had been, like that slingshot-cushioning charm I'd used at the base of the twin waterfalls, yet could I really crack a mountain in half?

I had no urge to try – no urge to grasp at that much power. I was here to save the world, not tear it apart. Voldemort already had that well in hand, and the really funny part, and I mean side-splitting hilariously funny, was that the Dark Lord had no godforsaken idea.

Ah, fucking Voldemort.

And fucking future-memory.

Fucking future-power.

Fucking time-travel.

Fucking foreign television.

My burnt and blistered hand, burnt gripping a sword of some strange make and design, was slowly going numb in a silver bucket of ice. A bucket that held three bottles of *Heineken*. Three empties made a tiny pyramid on the bedside table next to me, and I puffed quite angrily on a fat cigar on my comfy double-bed, scowling at the television and trying to follow an incomprehensible Italian movie.

Now I can speak the language, albeit a tad formally, but trying to make sense of this casual slang-Italian, and at this speed, just added to the pounding headache that had settled right between my eyes earlier that day, pretty much as soon as I'd woken up at the Dursleys'.

And add that to the two bastards that had tried to kill me – Tweedledum and Tweedledee – and I was one grouchy, pissed-off saviour of the world. I was contemplating healing my hand, despite how spectacularly wrong it would probably go, but the ice was working wonders alongside the alcohol.

Also, fucking *Heineken*.

What kind of tourist hotel didn't stock good old British lager? I'd even settle for German beer. The tap-water the Italians called beer was an

insult to my sensibilities, and that left the only thing approaching a good brew to be property of the Dutch.

I missed Fleur.

I missed my Order guardian...

Cigar was good though, even if I did feel a little nauseous.

Damn, I was always such a rookie back at the beginning.

My life is a monument to failure.

I personify the mother of all fuck-ups.

I've been told that you're supposed to learn from your past mistakes – well, I think my mistakes learn from me, because I go ahead and make the same old mistakes in brand new and exciting ways every damn time...

And there's nothing I can do about it.

Fucking causality of time.

Maybe there's a lesson in all of this? One I refuse to accept. Maybe I can't make a difference, maybe I can't change events enough to save billions of lives and all of civilisation...

Maybe humanity, in all its war-torn glory, is supposed to be wiped clean from the slate of existence...

I awoke the next morning to a steady throbbing between my eyes.

A throbbing that had nothing to do with the six beers I'd downed last night. Or the empty bottles of spirits from the mini-bar I'd raided sometime between ordering a club sandwich and falling asleep with a lit cigar dangling from my mouth. The bed sheets were scorched, I was lucky I hadn't burnt the hotel to the ground.

Maybe the headache had a little something to do with the heavy drinking. Gotta remember – I was only fifteen. And oh damn it, I'd have to take out a bank loan to pay for those tiny bottles of whiskey and vodka.

I felt like shit, and my mouth tasted like ash and shoe polish. I got up to put a stop to the room spinning around and around.

Yes! There was half a sandwich left from the night before. A little stale, the bacon was hard and cold, but it was like eating heaven anyway. I fell back onto the bed and before anything else – before anymore saving the world, fighting demons or seducing gorgeous women – I savoured the soggy lettuce and warm mayonnaise in the leftover sandwich.

I take life's pleasures in the moment, more often than not, because when you're me things are all too likely to go to shit sometime before lunch. Seriously, you can set your watch by it.

Well, no time to waste.

It was a little after dawn, the sun just cresting the western horizon visible through my window in the Italian Peninsula. There was a lot to do today – my first day back yesterday was always a bit of a holiday, I suppose, with Fleur. The goblins and demons had been an inconvenience, no doubt, but now I had to get on with things.

There was just over six weeks left until September 1st, and Hogwarts was in for a helluva surprise if I wasn't ready to make my stand in time.

Ha, stand in time. Get it? No? You will...

I grabbed my fancy suit and shiny new black shoes, and headed into the en-suite bathroom wishing I had another, fresh, sandwich. The Ring of Concealment, the dull gold band on my index finger, felt as cold as always – the ring never grew warm; it was always cool – as I slipped out of yesterday's clothes and into the shower.

Twenty minutes later and I admired myself in the mirror. I looked pretty damn good in the suit – approaching tall, dark and, shrugging

on the overcoat, I was even moderately handsome. My hand still felt as if I'd dipped it in molten liquid steel, but it was bearable – bearable enough to be ignored even. The burns weren't overly severe, just painful, and given a few days that would dull down to nothing. There was a spare amount of stubble on my cheeks, not enough to shave. I brushed my teeth using the complimentary toiletries and then set off downstairs.

"Good morning, Mr Rafe," the early morning desk clerk said in perfect English as I entered the hotel foyer. "Breakfast won't be served for half an hour, I'm afraid, sir."

"No matter, my good fellow," I replied, clutching my briefcase. I had transferred the few shirts and two pairs of jeans that had survived the attack yesterday, as well as the contents of my old school bag – the Invisibility Cloak, cigarettes and such – into the briefcase. It was bigger on the inside, charmed lighter, yet still crammed full at the moment. I needed to get myself a permanent address. "I shall be checking out immediately."

"Ah, so soon? Was there a problem with the room? Or the service?"

"Nope, not at all, just have to make an early start today."

"Of course."

I surrendered my swipe card to the portly little man behind the desk and settled up the bill with crisp and fresh cash notes from my stash in the briefcase. Damn, that sandwich cost fifteen pounds! And had been worth every penny. I confessed to emptying the mini bar, and paid another fifty quid for that, too.

"It was a pleasure having you here at the *Armi Latium*, Mr Rafe. Is there anything else we can do for you before you leave? Call you a car, sir?"

I shook my head. "No, I—" I caught a flash of silver under the cuff of the clerk's grey uniform. A slow smile spread across my face. "Hey, that's a nice watch..."

It was 06:25 and fifty-three seconds, Italian time, according to my new stainless steel, waterproof watch (only five hundred American off the hotel clerk – a bargain) when I exited the hotel in Tivoli and took a long, deep breath of morning air. Ah, it was good, and did wonders for my minor hangover... The headache persisted, however, but that had nothing to do with the booze, did it?

No, that was a time-travelling hangover. How many people suffer from those I wonder?

Me and my good buddy Ethan Rafe.

Now I said before that Tivoli is a part of the Italian region of Lazio, which going back several thousand years was known as *Latium*. And it was in Latium that people first began to harness the use of magic, to manipulate the forces of space... and time... Latium was home to the original Latin-speaking people, hence the strong Latin use in spellwork today.

The reason I had come here, instead of heading straight to Rome some thirty kilometres away, was that Rome has a large and, below the surface at least, quite visible magical community. Nothing the Muggles can pick up on, really, but next to some of the larger communities in the modern United States, the magical scene in Rome was the biggest in the world.

And I was trying to keep a low profile for awhile. Apparating directly into the heart of Rome, from an international start-point and quite illegally, probably wouldn't have been the best way to keep my head down. Even if I could manage it undetected – and I couldn't, there was someone in Rome who would detect such a subtle working of magic, no matter how hard I tried to hide it. I could cheat wards, wards aren't human, but one wise, old wizard in particular... nope.

Yet Rome was my next destination – for today, at least.

"And first bloody stop will be an apothecary for a painkilling potion," I mumbled, massaging my forehead. There had been no pain from my scar, and that was a good thing, yet my headache refused to die. Had I suffered so long the last time I travelled back?

"Maybe yes, maybe no, Harry," Mr Ethan Rafe said to me.

"I'm not gonna stand here talking to myself, Ethan," I replied, with all the sanity in the world.

"At least you look good doing it – you'll have to keep those shoes shiny."

"Shut up."

Heh, maybe I was losing my mind... Stranger things have happened. I Apparated all on my own for the second time ever, yet I'd had years of practice, and it was just a quick jaunt down the coast, and a little bit inland, to one of the oldest modern cities on the planet. Although there were older cities, far older, hiding just out of sight and around the corner.

Atlantis, for one, but that nightmare was to come...

And all nightmares are dreams, too. So be careful what you dream – I've said before that it is far too early for you to understand just what's at stake. That's still true, but you're beginning to see the first piece of the puzzle, by now, and no doubt you see the blood dripping from the serrated edges...? No?

You will – games like mine all too often have a beginning, middle, and end wrought in bloodshed. Nothing can ever be resolved without it. It is the way of the universe.

And Atlantis – fabled, lost Atlantis – you're in for a shock there, believe you me... for Atlantis is not a friendly place.

It's a secret place. And secrets are fragile.

Time is a secret, a cipher, even – a cryptic communication.

Yet secrets are fragile, and once they're done they can't be undone.

Time is just as fragile because of this, even more so because of this, and thus just as deadly.

I don't know where I'm going with these thoughts... or even how I'm thinking them, trapped as I am between one moment and the next – where the magic happens – and left with nothing but the never-ending pounding between my eyes.

Am I in too deep? Have I lost my mind?

I could ask Ethan, but that fucker's memory is just as messed up as mine.

Rome was home to a great library of magical knowledge, home to a vast repository of countless tomes and scrolls that had survived the ages intact, for the most part. For those in the know, this library is the fountain of history – the *Magnus Fontis*.

The *Magnus Fontis* has existed in some form for about three thousand years – through war, rebellion, and even simple accident the library has been destroyed and burnt to the ground on at least three separate occasions – what had survived wasn't as much as the ages of the world had promised, yet it was still mountains of knowledge. And it has existed for the last three thousand years underground.

Of course, not just anyone can waltz in off the street and hope to peruse the dusty old shelves and archives – in fact, only two select groups of people were granted access to the *Magnus Fontis* – and they were very select groups indeed. Needless to say, Albus Dumbledore was a member of both groups...

The International Confederation of Wizards and the International Federation of Warlocks.

Councils of wise old men and women, ancient and all-knowing – or arrogant enough to think so anyway – governing the magical world from seats of power and influence. Not a one of them would chance the path I've taken, or the path Voldemort has taken – yet Voldemort and I, however much I might detest it, are equal opposites... we stand alone in the world, and Time, as being both cunning and stupid enough to bend magic itself to our wills.

More stupid than cunning? Maybe yes, maybe no.

In the early years of the war – years to come, years long dead – Voldemort gains ancient power from what remains of Atlantis, from the epicentre of the last great age of magic, and the wise, old men and women of the Confederation and the Federation are the first to fall under the inhuman strength of his foreign armies.

After that, with most nations splintered against one another and law turned to chaos, it does not take long for humanity to destroy itself.

I've seen it happen time and time again... I couldn't *beat* Voldemort to Atlantis – for reasons that will become clear – as there were precepts and forgotten rights of passage that I had to obey if I was to have any hope of finding the Lost City again.

You see, it isn't always in the same place – even for a time-traveller.

And I can't really explain that, I barely understand it myself. It is something I'll have to discover along the way, I guess. That's the best I can do. Best is never enough, though, never enough...

Perhaps this time will be different. I think I've had that thought before. More than once. Damn it all.

Where was I?

Rome, yes.

I Apparated directly into the heart of the city, which rested on the Tiber River about twenty five clicks inland from the Tyrrhenian Sea. I appeared on the *Via Vittoria Veneto*, a street of grand hotels, business offices, and government buildings – as well as early morning breakfast cafés that catered to early morning businessmen and government officials.

The day was still young, only just gone 06:32 and forty-four seconds, local time, but I was starving for breakfast, and the rich aroma of freshly ground coffee, of baking bread and pastry, set my mouth watering under that azure, cloudless dawn sky in Italy.

I had appeared in one of the many winding side-alleys that criss-crossed the old city, and I have to say that I find the *Via Veneto* one of the most intriguing streets in the world. It's a twenty-four hour, seven day a week place, and I fit right in with the sparse crowd wearing my expensive Armani suit.

I headed on over to the nearest café, moving through that early-bird crowd, and an elderly woman looked me up and down with a warm smile.

"*Che cosa gradite?*" she asked. Roughly translated, *what do you want?*

"*Pancetta affumicata ed uova, per favore, ma'am. E salsiccia con pane tostato.*" Again, my Italian was a little formal and halted – but basically I'd asked for a good old English breakfast. Bacon, eggs, nice bit of sausage and toasted bread. There are few things more important than a good breakfast first thing in the morning. And I had an hour or two to kill before the main places I needed to visit would open – like the Apothecary.

I paid for my breakfast using the cash in my briefcase and took a seat out on the sidewalk whilst it was prepared. The *Via Veneto* runs downhill, and I sat nearer the top, looking down to where it curved out of sight in a rough dog's leg around the bend and into the heart of the city proper.

I miss Fleur, I thought quite simply, gazing down at the city and its countless historic buildings and fading monuments to a power gone by. *I wonder if she'd like to come here with me...* I thought about that. *Probably not, no, a little too dirty and crowded for her. For me, too, really.*

There was history here though – even the Muggles could feel that, hanging in the air all across this region of the country, an invisible tension, an itch that couldn't be scratched. For well over a thousand years Rome had controlled the destiny of all civilisation known to Europe – before it fell into disrepair and anarchy – and some of that power, that *faith*, still lingered.

Yet like all power it went *mad* – history's greatest lesson right there. The city, the Roman Empire, grew senile and impotent. It grew too old, too mutilated and proud, too paralysed to survive. A lot like Dumbledore, really, Merlin keep the old man safe...

Dumbledore was the reason I did not directly Apparate into the city last night.

He was here at the moment – just a mile or so away, actually, in the headquarters of the International Confederation of Wizards. And if anyone could catch the subtle fluctuations in magical energy that would ripple outwards from my arrival point when I broke through international wards, it would be him – or Voldemort. That's why I always came to Rome via Tivoli.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee had known that. I was keeping a sharp eye out for those two boys, or demons like them. It was frightening to think that they could abuse time much like I could. I absently scratched at the thin and pale-white scar over my heart, a gentle reminder, I suppose, that things aren't always what they seem.

Have I had that thought before?

My head was killing me.

Thankfully my breakfast arrived only a moment later – eggs fried and scrambled, bacon crisp and greasy – I dug in with relish, all but devouring the plate. It was closer to seven a.m. when I finished, and I let the food settle before making a move. Certain parts of the wizarding community would be opening up for the day soon, and were within walking distance of the *Via Veneto*.

I was in no rush, not for the next hour or two anyways... The International Confederation didn't open its doors until nine. Perhaps a bit more breakfast. I was unexpectedly ravenous this morning. I ordered pancakes, a huge fluffy stack, dripping in syrup with a generous dollop of whipped cream. There are few pleasures in life more satisfying than good food – I can think of at least one, but heh, I'm a red-blooded male – and after the crap I've been living on for the last few years, future-years, I had the right to indulge myself.

It's a cruel and random world, but the chaos is also beautiful... That thought seemed familiar, but for the life of me...

*I can't remember **why** Why I made this choice all those years ago?*

I've come to believe that the universe has a way of course correcting.

That I could go back in time, sure, and try and make a difference, but whether the world ends one way or another, if the universe wants it to end, if its supposed to happen, then it will – no matter what I do.

I don't want to believe this.

Yet it could be the truth...

Fate works in mysterious ways, and I reckon only on a grand scale. I mean, I saved Fleur's life – she was meant to die – will the universe correct for that? Or does it take into account the changes I make travelling through time and adapt...?

Damn it all, is it still Fleur's fate to die an early death? That's not in my memories, but then, neither are the Time Demons.

Don't try and understand, or you'll end up with a headache to match mine. Time is time, and is Time, and time's nothing but everything and all that's in between. Trust me when I say that made sense.

Fate only takes us so far before blocking all the exits, and once we're there it's up to us to make the future happen. But I could be wrong – wouldn't be the first time.

Breakfast was a happy memory.

I'd need that in the weeks to come, especially if I didn't get a chance to see Fleur or Tonks again before Atlantis... or Ron and Hermione. That gave me pause for a moment – I'd barely given those two a second of thought since Waking Up from the Dream. There was no excuse, really, even though they'd been dead for years...

Ron and Hermione. Heh, I couldn't wait to see them – but it would be weeks before I returned to England. *If* I returned to England without getting killed in some new and exciting way.

Fucking demons.

The sun had risen enough through the pale light of dawn to cast a blanket of warm light over the city as I strolled away from the *Via Veneto*, full of good food and a desire to get on with the day. Life would be so much easier if there were a fast-forward button... but then I shouldn't wish away time. It's all we have, really, and never enough.

I took to the back alleys of Rome, walking swift and sure through the winding streets away from the business and government district and into the older, more traditional background of the city. I soon looked out of place in my fine suit, on the lower east bank amongst the fresh vegetable markets and fish stalls on the shore of the Tiber River.

The sights, sounds, and smells of the markets were wonderful. In this part of the city the streets had never really been repaved since antiquity, and my feet settled into the ruts left by ancient wagons of time long ago. Four-wheeled *carrucas* used to ferry merchandise and baggage across the city and off into the region of Latium.

Simpler times back then, more *magical* times.

Today the modern markets were stocked from the wholesaler and the crates on the massive refrigerated trucks, and the fish came fresh from the sea to the west fifteen miles away, iced and still twitching. Overhead a jumbo jet, a commercial passenger plane, tore the serenity of the opening markets for a moment, and I moved on toward the banks of the river, wondering when I'd had the time to gain all of these memories about the city.

I knew a lot, more than I'd known yesterday morning. But then I'd only been a fifteen year old kid yesterday, mourning the loss of the only real father figure I've ever had. Today I am something else... and that wasn't all to the good, really. Not even close.

I am Harry Potter, I thought, walking along the docks now, stepping over fishing nets and water-faded buoys. I'm fifteen-nearly-sixteen. I'm a wizard. I attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. My best friends are Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. My godfather recently died because I fucked up big time, and the darkest wizard to have ever lived (and died) wants to stick my head on a pike out the front of his evil lair...

It was 08:12 and seven seconds.

I could hear the waters of the River Tiber slopping up against the old stone pillars that held up the docks, and the wind caught my overcoat billowing out behind me as I reached the end of a small wooden pier jutting out just over the water, built for the smaller fishing boats.

I gazed out over the river at the city. I was near to Rome's equivalent of Diagon Alley. That wizarding community I said was hiding out of sight and around the corner – well, that corner was just ahead, if I followed the river about a quarter mile east deeper into the city.

"Do you have the time, young man?"

I fell out of my thoughts and gazed down along the wooden pier. There was an old woman resting in a simple rocking chair, rocking back and forth, and listening to the radio. Her chair looked out on the bustling river and the steady stream of fishing boats heading into port. I wondered how she came to be there.

She was gazing right at me but her eyes were white and the irises pale – almost inhuman, like a vampire – yet she was merely blind. Her gnarled old fingers clutched a walking stick of twisted old wood. The wood was flecked with dents and seemed more a part of the woman than her faded purple dress and blue-knit shawl.

"Twelve minutes past eight and forty-two seconds," I said, not needing to glance at my wrist. I'd only checked the watch a moment ago, and as I've said before – you have to understand time, and Time, to be able to wade through the roaring currents of Then and Now. Almost subconsciously I keep a pretty good count in my head of the exact time.

As it was relative to me, that is.

“Ah, thank you, dear,” the old lady replied, in perfect English. She didn’t even have an accent. “You’re an English boy?”

“I am,” I said, taking a few steps closer to the woman and her radio. A familiar tune was warbling out through the static of the two cracked speakers.

‘Hey Jude, don’t be afraid...’

“The Beatles, nineteen-sixty-eight,” the old lady said. “Those four boys ruled the world at one point... Times change, though.”

‘...you were made to go out and get her. The minute you let her under your skin, then you’ll begin... to make it better.’

“Time does indeed change,” I said. This felt strange. I had no memory of the woman. “My name is Harry.”

“Nice to meet you, Harry. I am Saturnia.”

Saturnia? Why was that familiar? Yeah, I was definitely on my fucking guard. This was a whole load of suspicious. “That’s a lovely name.”

‘And any time you feel the pain,’ the Beatles sang, *‘hey Jude refrain, don’t carry the world upon your shoulders...’*

The old lady laughed, showing her yellow teeth and wrinkled tongue. Her unseeing eyes looked right at me, through me. It was unnerving. “An English gentleman, no less,” she said, thumping her walking stick against the pier. “Lovely name, he says!”

I couldn’t help but smile. She seemed so harmless, so old – blind and fragile. “How did you know I was a young man?” I asked.

“Eh?”

“Forgive me, ma’am, but you’re blind, and when you asked me for the time you said ‘do you have the time, young man?’”

“Ah.” Saturnia grinned. “To a lady my age, dear, you are all young men.” She tapped her ear. “And it’s also in your step, Harry – far too hurried and eager. You have places to be, I’d say, and not five minutes of time to spare chatting to an old crone like me.”

I laughed. *And yet we’re in Italy but you asked in English first? Two plus two equals five, lady.*

The radio resting on the empty fishing pods next to her crackled and whined. *‘For well you know that it’s a fool, who plays it cool, by making his world a little colder...’*

Perhaps I was being a little paranoid. Heh, was it really being paranoid when you had as many enemies as I did? Hell, it was being *smart*.

“Are you here on holiday, Harry?”

“Business, actually.” A small fishing boat pulled into the pier nearby, and one of the men aboard placed a short gangway plank across the gap between the boat and the mooring anchor on the dock.

“Oh?”

‘Hey Jude, don’t let me down... you have found her, now go and get her. Remember to let her into your heart, then you can start to make it better...’ The radio fizzled and died to static.

“Young man’s business,” I said. The scent of fish wafted strongly on the breeze up the pier from the new boat. I crinkled my nose, yet the old woman Saturnia did not seem to mind it at all.

“Then you’re either chasing a girl or a dream, Harry,” she said.

“Can’t it be both? They’re one and the same a lot of the time...”

Saturnia tilted her head to the side, as if seeing me in a whole new light... or however her mind pictured me, through those misty eyes. “That was wise beyond your years, boy. How... wonderful!”

"I should be going..." I said. I wanted to get a damned cure for my headache. It was a persistent bastard, I'd give it that.

"Of course," Saturnia replied, straightening her shawl across her shoulders. Her sightless gaze held mine for a heavy, pregnant moment. "No *time* to waste..."

Did I imagine the emphasis placed on that four-letter curse word? No, I bloody didn't. "I've got time to kill, ma'am, but no time to waste."

One of the grizzled fishermen from the nearby boat turned to look at me, a frown furrowing his brow. He glanced at the old woman and raised his eyebrows.

Saturnia snorted and stamped her cane against the pier again. "Men think they are killing time, Harry, whilst time quietly kills them."

Oh, was that a threat? "What do you know of time, old—?" I began, a snarl marring my tone.

"*State comunicando con me?*" the grizzled fisherman said in harsh Italian, pulling a black beanie off his head and shrugging his shoulders. "*Chi state comunicando con?*" *Are you talking to me? Who are you talking to?*

I turned to look at him, taking my eyes off the old lady for just a heartbeat. When I looked back, she was gone. All that remained was a broken old rocking chair and the empty shell of a busted radio that looked like it hadn't sang a tune in decades.

Saturnia, the old lady – or whatever she had really been – had disappeared in that space between one moment and the next... where the magic happens.

Well, there you go...

"*Nessuno*," I said to the fisherman, turning and hurrying away from the small pier. "No one at all..."

I stormed along the paved walkway alongside the river, heading quickly now to the *Via Magicka* – three guesses what kind of shops

are on *that* street – and casting my thoughts through the fuzzy, jumbled memories in my head looking for any previous encounters with a woman, or a creature, named Saturnia.

I came up empty, and that was troubling. Had I imagined the whole conversation? Or was something else screwing with me? Something else that, perhaps, had a grip on Time... Most of her conversation had revolved around time in some way.

“Do you have the time, young man?” I growled under my breath, my knuckles turning white around the handle of my briefcase. I could only conclude, if I hadn’t gone stark raving mad, that the old woman, Saturnia, had known who I was and what I could do.

Just like Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Great. *Fucking* great.

I’d keep an eye out for her – that was all I could do. And something told me, call it the voice of long experience, that no matter how blind Saturnia was, she would be keeping an eye out for me, too.

I wasn’t just simply angry – I was *furious*.

“Time belongs to *me*,” I growled. “*TIME BELONGS TO ME!*”

Several people, including a woman with a pram, took a wise step out of my path as I stomped on by, my face as dark as a thunderstorm after that irrational outburst.

I was acting crazy – was I crazy? Insane? Had a screw popped loose somewhere along the line? Even if I hadn’t been to the end of the world and back once or twice, being Harry Potter was fucked up enough to make anyone unstable.

Do crazy people wonder if they’re crazy?

Maybe yes, maybe no...

I took a deep breath and counted back from ten slowly, letting the anger go. I couldn’t afford to be so distracted. Anyone could be out to get me – anyone at all. Or *anything*.

I could feel the magic in the air before I began to see signs of it. As I approached the *Via Magicka* from the river I caught sight of the odd person in robes, or wearing a pointed wizard's hat. There were Muggles around, sure, but they never really see anything, do they?

Especially with all the notice-me-not charms the Italian Ministry has in place around this part of the city in particular. There were literally thousands of magical folk in this city, living for the most part in plain sight, blending in with the non-magical population.

Rome was a centre for the magical world – not only are the highest governing bodies based here, the Confederation and Federation held representatives from all the magical nations on the planet – but no other city in the world boasts a magical population as big as the one all around me.

“Hey Jude... don't let me down...” I mumbled, and then scowled. There had been no radio – why had the haggard old woman had that song playing at all?

I left the river and crossed over a road with light traffic, heading over a grassy embankment dotted with archaic oak trees. Just ahead across the field of grass were a pair of large wooden doors supported under a keystone arch, nestled between two grey office buildings that had seen better days.

The large double doors were wide open and as I approached I could make out the engraving of the street name in a golden plaque secured against the smooth marble of the stone arch:

Via Magicka

The steady stream of people walking past the entrance to Rome's Diagon Alley didn't notice it at all, their eyes slid from the dreary office building on one side to the dreary office building on the other, much like the Leaky Cauldron back in London. A few people, magical people, walked through the doors and disappeared around a bend and out of sight – and in the case of the Muggles, out of *mind*.

I stepped across the threshold and onto the bumpy cobblestones of the *Via Magicka* and felt the gentle pressure of the wards and

Muggle-repelling charms around the street recognise a magical signature and let me pass unhindered.

I followed the start of the street down and around. It curved out of sight of the main Muggle streets and the last sparkling view of the Tiber River, and all at once I was hit in the face with the wizarding world.

Diagon Alley was tiny compared to this place, no doubt about that. The *Via Magicka* is a wide open street, caught between one district and the next. It was an alley, I suppose, but three times the width of the one back home, and packed with more magical shops and pubs, more wizards and witches, than Diagon Alley on its busiest day of the year.

And there were no wanted posters for Azkaban escapees. There *were* shady dealers manning dark looking stalls selling all manner of crap, yet that was just the culture in this part of the *Magicka*. Further down the street were the more pricy shops, and even a branch of Gringotts.

I definitely did not want to be recognised by the goblins, so I'd steer clear of that. I liked my head firmly attached to my shoulders, and those cheeky little buggers had magic they hid all too well from wizard-kind. Strong magic, magic I could overcome, had overcome more than once, but I didn't have the time or the patience to test it again.

They'd given me the Ring of Concealment, which was all I really needed of them... They'd given me one of the keys to the ancient world, after all.

"And any time you feel the pain... Hey Jude... refrain..." I paused and then cursed mildly at the song caught in my head. *All time classic, my ass...*

I had memories, blurry as they were, of being here before, and as I jostled my way through the crowds, keeping a firm grip on my briefcase, I headed straight for where I remembered one of the better apothecaries to be. I also had memories of this street in flames, of Dementors roaming amongst the ruins under the cool dead of night,

and of ash swirling on the air as thick as a snowstorm. I shivered and pushed those memories away – they belonged to a dark future.

I stepped into the foul-smelling and dimly-lit *Moretti & Costa's Apothecary*, drawing from my briefcase the sack of galleons I'd taken from Gringotts in London. I emerged a few minutes later with a small brown paper bag of pre-brewed potions designed to get straight to the source of pain, and relieve the hell out of it.

I uncorked the first bottle and downed the potion in one quick swallow. Damn it all! They always tasted like crap, no matter how much I tried *not to taste it* on the way down. I felt my large breakfast rebelling for a moment before my stomach settled and the potion got to work...

Was I really surprised when the strongest pain-relieving potion on the market didn't make a damn bit of difference to my headache?

I swallowed the second, and then the third and fourth bottle I'd bought like they were the contents of last night's mini-bar – three times the recommended dosage and... nothing. The best I got was a tingly feeling in my left hand as the potion took care of the pain from the burns.

And in a strange, pathetic way the pain in my hand had helped to distract me from the pain in my head. Now that it was gone, my head seemed to pound all the more. Still, I'd also bought a salve for the burns and rubbed it in gently, soothing the dry, sore skin. It should heal up fine – no scar or nothing.

I discarded the empty potion bottles and paper bag in a nearby rubbish bin and rubbed at my forehead absently, thinking only bad things about a headache that wouldn't die. Nothing for it but to get on with the day though, was there?

I spent the next half an hour or so browsing through a few certain shops in the *Via Magicka* and keeping my head down. Harry Potter was a famous wizard, after all, and recognisable all over the world. Not so much out of England, but it was still a distinct possibility. Especially in Rome – the proverbial heart of the magical world.

I kept my wand at the ready in the inner pocket over the left side of my chest, ready to draw in a heartbeat should evil attack, yet I moved unnoticed for the most part. A few street vendors tried to peddle me their wares. I gave them a look more often than not reserved for facing down Dark Lords and Death Eaters and they backed off.

In a shop not that dissimilar from Borgin and Burke's in Knockturn Alley I bought a curious little object.

There wasn't room in my briefcase for a lot of purchases. In fact it was ready to burst – yet I still managed to spend all but twenty-five of the galleons I'd withdrawn in London. Five galleons went on the potions from the apothecary. The rest of the gold – about two hundred and seventy pieces – went on a useful item that would come in handy later that day, if events played out as they were supposed to play out.

I wrapped a heavy yet fragile glass sphere within the folds of the Invisibility Cloak, making sure it was cushioned well. The glass was warm to the touch – hot, even – and a live flame shone pale blue and golden-red within the heart of the sphere. I tucked it carefully down into the briefcase and did the clasp up tight.

09:02 and fifteen seconds.

It was shaping up to be a busy morning. Time to go.

There is no reason why things end.

It is simply Purpose, and Meaning.

Sometimes I think the dark is drawn to the light as a moth to the flame. Maybe it is the nature of all things to be pulled towards their opposite.

I mean, look at Voldemort and myself – Fate arranges it quite often for our paths to cross. Usually, at least one person has to die to meet that end. The past is cruel, no doubt about that...

Ah well, here's to days to come...

It was 09:23 and fifty-eight seconds. I had nearly come full circle back to the *Via Veneto* and that wonderful little café and its orgasmic pancakes.

I was heading up a hill now, away from that part of town, and towards one of the oldest standing structures in all of Rome – all of the world, even – the Pantheon.

The Pantheon is a great stone circular building, adorned with a portico comprising of three ranks of solid Corinthian columns. It has existed across the centuries since about 125AD, and was originally built as a temple to all the gods of Ancient Rome. Perhaps the best preserved building of its age in the world, the Pantheon has been in constant use throughout its history.

It became a Christian church in the seventh century, but long before that, the *Magnus Fontis* was built down - *deep* down – beneath its massive circular dome. Oh yes, this was the Great Library – the Fountain of History. And this, the Pantheon, was also the meeting place for all the nations belonging to the International Confederation of Wizards and the International Federation of Warlocks.

I walked briskly across the street and up the timeworn marble steps under the portico of the Pantheon, and through the pediment opening thrown open against a pair of old bronze doors, once plated with gold. Even this early, the crowds of tourists and sightseers were thick and heavy in the main rotunda of the circular building.

I stood for a moment gazing around in appreciation at the wealth of history around me, of the art and mosaic tiles that adorned the coffered, domed ceiling. A beam of strong sunlight poured in through the central opening, the oculus – the Great Eye, an open hole at the apex of the dome.

History – that vast ocean of recorded time – swirled around me, swept me away, and even eased my headache for the briefest of moments. I took a deep breath, savouring the peace.

It was likely to be the last moment I'd get today.

The large rotunda of the Pantheon was too packed, two hundred footsteps and hushed, excited voices echoed across the moulded coffers overhead as I strolled past the niches and chapels that held the remains of some of history's greatest players.

There was Raphael, the painter, several long dead Italian kings, religious figures – and I had even been led to believe that at one point the remains of Merlin himself had been entombed here... but if so they were long gone. Statues and busts of these people, paintings from famous and unknown artists, rested in the chapels behind bars of velvet rope.

I walked over to the high altar, complete with an apse holding an enshrined icon of the Madonna, and stepped behind it and into one of the marble niches that seemed a little bare compared to the bursting artwork in the other chapels.

There were a few people in here, gazing at the old tomb of King Victor Emmanuel II, and if any of them noticed me they forgot it almost immediately as I walked straight into the faded marble wall on the far side of the chapel and disappeared.

Much like the concealed entrance to Platform Nine and Three Quarters back home at Kings Cross station, the wizarding world had hidden the entrance to its greatest governing bodies and massive secret library in plain view of the world.

Here we go, I thought, as I emerged through the wall at the top of a wide set of curving stairs that led down and around out of sight. I stepped down them briskly, my shoes soundless on the cool red velvet that carpeted the old stone.

Magical light, strong and yellow, burned from torches held in brackets either side. I past a few wizards and witches on the way down, and they eyed me askance in my fine Muggle suit.

The International Confederation and Federation were technically open to the public, most of the time, for viewing, yet not many who weren't members bothered with that. Like most politics, it was there for the whole world to see but few cared in today's modern age.

I followed the wide staircase down and around a final time, deeper underground, and came to a large chamber beneath the Pantheon that was just as packed, if not more so, than the tourist attraction overhead.

Chandeliers of crystal light dangled down from the roof, sparkling softly above the sea of magical folk moving about the chamber, heading off into the many doors, too many to count, leading away from the main hall. There were heavy curtains of old fabric dangling down from the roof and anchored against the walls. Curtains of all different colours displaying the flags of the world, and the seals of individual international Ministries.

The Grand Entrance Chamber of the Confederation and Federation was not unlike the Atrium at the Ministry of Magic back home, but this was on a much larger scale.

My eyes scanned the crowd before I stepped down off the staircase and I counted at least three dozen Aurors and security people dotted about the place, guarding the doors – and about two dozen more that were mingling with the crowds, trying to avoid attention. It didn't seem likely that a sword-wielding demon would be here, of all places, but then those bastards hadn't hesitated to gut me in the broad sunlight on a busy morning at Diagon Alley.

I decided to proceed as planned. I couldn't do much else, really. I was already behind schedule after the attack last night.

I moved through the crowds and over to one of the larger doors before a flag-curtain of cool blue and white, with two wands crossed over a single staff of knotted wood. The emblem of the Federation of Warlocks. The door was barred closed with Aurors standing guard – clearly a closed session.

I took a seat against the wall nearby, next to the reporters and various supporters and aides of the wizards deciding the future policies of the Federation, and discussing the threat of all-out war back home, just beyond the heavy oak door.

It was 09:38 exactly. I didn't have long to wait, if memory served.

I sat twiddling my thumbs on the cushioned stone bench against the wall for twenty three minutes and twelve seconds – I checked my watch, spot on – when the large oak door was thrown open and wizened old men in robes of resplendent blue with silver-white trim emerged, all of them toting a staff with a small crystal embedded in the top, shining softly in an array of different colours. Each of the Warlocks sported an impressive beard that I had no hope of matching until the late twenty first century.

Albus Dumbledore appeared at the tail end of the group of old men, deep in discussion with two wizards who were gesturing widely with their staffs, speaking a foreign language I didn't understand. I think it was Turkish, but for all I knew it could have been Swahili.

His sparkling blue eyes, eyes that had seen the world change again and again across the long decades, swept across the chamber much like mine had, taking everything in behind those half-moon spectacles.

I wasn't that far away from him, only about fifteen feet, and his gaze fell on me, sitting against the wall, before moving on. I waited for it... and his head snapped back to me, his mouth opening in a small 'O'.

For a moment I thought I caught that flicker of surprise crossing Dumbledore's face, yet it came and went so fast that I may have imagined it. The old man's poker face was far too clever well-worn to give much away. Heh, if anything he looked as if he had expected me.

"Harry," the old Headmaster said, ignoring his fellow Warlocks entirely.

I gave him a wave with my good right hand, and a small shrug.

Dumbledore took a moment to bid his companions farewell, and then turned to me with that kind old grandfatherly look on his face, his staff thumping on the cool marble tiles as he approached. I shoved up, making some room on the stone bench, and he took a seat next to me.

"Hello, Professor Dumbledore," I said. "Of all the cities in all the world..."

“Harry, my dear boy. May I ask what brings you to Rome?”

I smiled, showing my teeth. “Why, adventure, of course, sir.”

Dumbledore blinked, and then a slow grin made his eyes twinkle. “Ah, a flighty temptress – and a harsh mistress, Harry. You left the protection of Privet Drive... there are more than quite a few people turning England inside out looking for you.”

“Tonks told you I’d absconded, bless her heart.”

“Nymphadora was quite put out that you decided to disappear on her watch.”

“I’ll make it up to her. I had places to be, people to see...”

“Indeed, I believe you not only thwarted a Death Eater attack in Diagon Alley, but saved the life of Miss Delacour. After that, you were far too clever for me to find, and I regret that I had business to attend to here, although it has proved more fortuitous than I first hoped. You are found!”

I nodded slowly, resting my burnt hand on my lap. Dumbledore glanced at the burns, slowly healing under the salve I’d bought at the *Via Magicka*, with a frown. He then rested his own hand across his lap – it was blackened and shrivelled, looking as though the flesh had been burnt away.

I sighed deeply at the sight of it. What I wouldn’t give to be able to go back in time further than yesterday. It was *never* enough. Fucking gods. Fucking fine print.

“I’d heard you’d be here, sir,” I said. “I came to see you, in fact.”

“Hmm... I had reasoned as much, Harry. Although I had hoped that perhaps you had come here to view the Confederation in session – too few people take an interest these days.”

“Ah, some other time, perhaps. I’m not brave enough to stomach politics, Professor.”

Dumbledore folded his blackened and scorched hand into the folds of his robes. If he was put out that I hadn't commented on it he didn't let it show. And he was still smiling, eyes still twinkling. "It is good to see you, though I must know, why are you here?"

"Well, just between you and me..." I glanced about, making sure no one could overhear our conversation. "I was hoping to get into the *Magnum Fontis*." No beating around the bush.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow – he was definitely surprised now. "You have caught me off guard there, Harry." His features resumed their grandfatherly mask. "Is Miss Granger with you? I would imagine she would give all the gold in Gringotts for a single hour in the Library."

"It's just me," I said.

"If you know of the Library then you must be aware of the entry requirements, dear boy. At the very least, you need a beard you can tuck into your belt."

"Or an Invisibility Cloak..." I whispered. "And the Supreme Mugwump and Chief Warlock, the Grand Sorcerer, of both the International Confederation of Wizards and the Federation of Warlocks to open the door, Professor." I paused, meeting the old Headmaster's eyes. "I have both with me here."

Dumbledore held my gaze for a long moment, giving nothing away. "Lemon drop, Harry?" He produced a paper bag of sweets from his robes.

"Thank you," I said, popping one of the sour sweets into my mouth.

"I must admit that you have my curiosity buzzing – what is in the *Magnus Fontis* that is worth ten years of prison time, should you be caught in its dim and dusty corridors?"

I wouldn't be getting caught.

"Knowledge, of course, something I don't want Voldemort to have, Professor." I tapped my infamous lightning bolt scar. "I left Privet

Drive because I saw what he was planning to do. He's coming here – to get something, something to do with a... Horcrux? I don't know the word, but I can see you do."

I could lie with the best of them – but I couldn't justify it. It was good to see Albus Dumbledore again after so long. He was always one of the first to die once Voldemort gains his power. And it's not fair, not fair at all, but I've shed enough tears – too many – against the unfairness of the world. I hated having to abuse the trust the old man had in me, though, and it left me feeling wretched and guilty. Nothing for it though but to lie through my teeth... At the end of the day, it was necessary.

The twinkle left Dumbledore's eyes and he glanced around, making sure that no one had heard me use that dark, dark word – Horcrux. "Be careful, Harry, be very careful. You've stumbled upon magic of the darkest nature."

There's darker, I thought, so much darker. If you knew what I'd done you'd be so ashamed, Dumbledore, and rightly so... Merlin damn it all...

"Do you know what Tom is after?"

I shook my head, looking uncertain. "I only had glimpses of his thoughts, through the pain in the scar – I think I heard something about the *Valde Claustum*, whatever that is. I get the feeling I'll know it when I see it... kinda like the prophecy."

Dumbledore sighed, resting his staff in the crook of his shoulder. "The Great Cloister – the deepest and oldest part of the *Magnus Fontis*." He paused. "I think it best we return you to Surrey, Harry, and get you back behind the wards at Privet Drive. There are old magics and enchantments in the Library. It is not safe even for a wizard of my modest skill."

"The adventure is that way," I said, pointing across the chamber to a set of plain wooden doors that didn't look in anyway particularly important. It was the corridor that led to the *Magnus Fontis*, however. I saw Dumbledore trying to puzzle out how I'd known the way. "Shall we pursue it or not, Professor?"

The twinkle flared briefly in the old man's eyes again, and I knew I had him, as I always did. I still felt like shit though for abusing Dumbledore's trust – and he'd know it all too soon once we got down into the Library.

I reminded myself that it had to be done, that this was the only way. Atlantis, awaits, for those stupid enough to dare the path of the ancient world... and that path, for me, began here. Voldemort had dared a different road, one I couldn't follow without tearing my soul asunder and scattering it to the four winds...

This has to be done!

Time would tell if I was doing the right thing – Time always does.

A/N: Ah, there we go. This feels like a good place to end the chappie. What do you think, dear reader? Love it? Hate it? Like where it's heading?

*I think Dumbledore being manipulative to the point of absurdity to protect Harry has been done to death, so I thought it'd be cool to write a story where Dumbledore actually **helps** our hero – that makes more sense, really, than forcing him home.*

Things are about to heat up now – the last few chapters have been setting the scene, giving a lot of background information. Whilst there are still a lot of unanswered questions, I want to write Harry answering them on the fly, acting and reacting, over the next few chapters. We'll see Fleur again soon, maybe Tonks a little later, and perhaps a few new characters.

There'll definitely be monsters.

Please review, let me know how I'm doing,

Joe

Chapter 7 – Places I've Never Been

Teach us...

To give and not count the cost;

To fight and not heed the wounds;

To toil and not to seek for rest...

--St Ignatius Loyola

"So let it out and let it in... Hey Jude, begin..." I mumbled, my thoughts running a mile a minute under the silvery folds of my faithful old Invisibility Cloak. I tapped a steady beat to *The Beatles* with my hand against the side of my briefcase.

"Be silent now, Harry," Dumbledore whispered. "One does not simply stroll unaccounted for into the *Magnus Fontis*."

I caught myself humming the tune under my breath and bit my lip, falling back into the cool archaic corridor deep beneath the Pantheon and well beyond the simple chambers and halls of the International Confederation of Wizards and International Federation of Warlocks.

Dumbledore led the way, although from my jumbled memories I thought I could've picked the route myself. I needed the old Headmaster, however, as there were several security features unique to the Great Library, the Fountain of History, that only an honest-to-god true-blue member of the Confederation/Federation could bypass.

Sure I could've blasted my way in – given my new future magical knowledge a workout – but that would've alerted every Auror in the Northern Hemisphere that the headquarters of the greatest governing body in the world was under attack. Not my best move, once upon a time. This job required a little finesse, a little subtlety – basically, I had to keep it in my pants.

And with any luck, when all was said and done, only Dumbledore's trust in me would be left broken and bleeding. Believe me – small price to pay.

We travelled *down*.

At first the corridors were well-lit, dry and even carpeted. Works of art, wizarding portraits, appeared above vases containing bunches of flowers alongside filing cabinets and general office paraphernalia, and there were other wizards and witches, going about Merlin knew what this far beneath the ground. After about ten minutes and several sets of spiralling staircases, the corridors became colder, and the walls were bare save for the irregular ever-burning torch hanging in dull and rusty brackets.

Yeah, it was a little creepy, and I did my best to keep my footfalls soft and avoid the echoing *clap-clap-clap* that Dumbledore's boots made on the damp stone. Rivulets of ground-water dripped in through cracks in the ceiling, having worn through the stone over the millennia. The corridor curved downwards and out of sight, and I recalled that it was about a *billion* miles long.

Dumbledore glanced at me more than once, looking right at me through the Invisibility Cloak. I've never known for sure if he could see through the material, but I erred on the side of caution and assumed he could. I gave him a thumbs-up every five minutes or so. He carried his staff from the Warlock meeting before him, and guided the way with a pale blue light from the crystal embedded in its crown as the torches on the walls failed completely. We were plunged into complete and utter darkness two miles below the surface of the earth.

And we weren't even halfway there.

Of the two of us, I was supposedly the young and fit one, yet I was having trouble keeping up with Dumbledore. I needed to get into shape, but I'd be damned if I was giving up smoking. I mean I know yesterday was technically the first time I'd ever smoked a cigarette, but I'd brought the addiction across time itself. I consider that an achievement.

And hell, I was allowed a few guilty pleasures, wasn't I? I was saving the world, after all... Yeah, I know, addicts justify it anyway they can. And my saving the world wasn't that great, but this time was different... it had to be – too many things were fucking with me left, right and centre.

"And any time you feel the pain... Hey Jude, refrain..."

"Harry, silence please," Dumbledore whispered, his brow knotting into a severe frown. "We are both risking far too much should you be caught down here."

Fucking Beatles.

Fucking Saturnia, whatever the hell you are, old woman.

Sometimes there are not many paths to take – most times, for me, there has been only one.

And I'm no saint.

*The choices I've made and will continue to make end lives, spawn misery and chaos, yet they also save lives... prevent destruction and hold true to the path that **had** to be taken!*

Life is far too precious to let it slip into the perils of unknown worlds... yet who will remember that before the end? Voldemort? Myself? No... even if we did we wouldn't let it matter.

Otherwise, none of this would be any fun!

Ha-fuckity-ha-ha-ha...

Dumbledore and I came to the first barrier (the first of seven – seven is a magical number, after all, aye, Voldemort?) that protected the *Magnus Fontis* from unauthorised use. The corridor we had followed for the last half an hour down through the bowels of the earth and almost all the way to China, abruptly ended in a wall of blank granite stone.

A dead end, or so it would seem.

Dumbledore glanced in my general direction and the look on his face made it clear that if I so much as uttered a word he would become

less grandfatherly and much more cranky. I never met my grandfather, yet I imagine James Potter's father could not have had a brow as severe as Albus Dumbledore's. In all my long years, of gods and madmen, I've never seen a man of such power be so humble and kind.

Power was supposed to corrupt. I think Dumbledore was as close to the exception that proved the rule as anyone has ever come.

Sure, he could be a manipulative bastard, but his heart was forever and always in the right place – and if he'd taken a chance more than once, and let me risk my own life, so what? If he'd perhaps allowed events to run their course, and hardened me through the various challenges I'd come up against at Hogwarts, could I really blame him, knowing the Prophecy?

Is there an answer to that? Maybe yes, maybe no... Life is hard, deal with it, the only easy place you'll find is the grave. In another life, I used to cry – on my own, away from those who would see weakness – when Dumbledore was killed. These days... well, these days, these days, right? I'm old now, old enough to be truly tired. And no longer sane enough to cry.

I fucking hate this game.

And I was young, Merlin damn it all, young enough for all that mattered.

"Nostrum én alá forsé – verisestrum!" Dumbledore intoned, the hilt of his staff poised against the solid barrier before us. It shimmered and faded away, revealing a further dark and dank corridor – the path to the second barrier of the *Magnum Fontis*.

We hurried along, and a cool shiver rushed down my spine as in the darkness behind us the first barrier resealed itself. The oppressive and heavy weight of anti-Apparation wards felt sluggish and heavy on my shoulders. The wards were the first line of defence to keep people *out*, not in. I thought I could break through them, if necessary, yet I didn't feel like shattering a corridor with over two miles of rock and earth resting just overhead.

The second and third barriers were much the same as the first – thrumming with power enough to withstand a nuclear blast, and requiring both a wizard's staff and an incantation in some lost, archaic language. The doors parted swiftly under Dumbledore's authority.

The fourth and fifth barriers, again resembling nothing but the dead end of a long and ultimately pointless dark corridor, required something a little more. The barriers were not smooth stone, but rough and bumpy, covered in sharp angles of twisted rock that looked cold and merciless. Dumbledore raised his hand and pricked his finger on one of the broken angles of rock – a drop of his blood shone in the darkness, ignited by the magic in the stone.

Blood magic. Great.

He then proceeded to offer his staff and a string of nonsense words, and barriers four and five dissolved before our eyes, parting the way. Heavy curved stone slammed shut and back into place almost as soon as Dumbledore had stepped through – I had to be quick to make sure I wasn't left behind, or crushed within a barrier of jagged rock.

"Nearly there now," Dumbledore whispered, apparently speaking to himself, because there was no one else here, was there? Of course not.

Down this far the air was stale, ill-used, and tasted as if it had been swept through dusty, ancient parchment. Still far below, there was a power calling to me - I could feel it in the pit of my stomach, a subtle string of fear creeping through my bowels, telling me perhaps that it would be best to turn back, to abandon the madness and live out the few short years left as best I could...

Lot of trouble went into protecting a silly old library, didn't it? Makes you wonder just what books might be down in the *Magnus Fontis*... or what might have been *hidden* in the long millenniums past.

"The Sixth Barrier," Dumbledore said, again to himself. "A test of resolve – of will."

I remained dutifully silent as we approached the end of the dark corridor. The faint pale light from Dumbledore's staff seemed insignificant against the burning runes of fire blazing against the wall that was the barrier in our path. As we approached, the flames roared and absorbed the stone entirely – a curtain of dry and hot fiery death barred the way.

I knew what needed to be done, and Dumbledore did not hesitate – thrusting his shrivelled and blackened hand into the flame. All at once the red-hot flames turned a shade of the coolest electric-blue, and the old Headmaster shivered as a rush of raw power flew through him. I caught the backlash, taking a step back as the curtain of flames parted.

"Quickly now," Dumbledore said, musing to himself. I hurried on through between the fires alongside the Headmaster before his iron resolve could waver and bring the curtain crashing back down. When we were through, Dumbledore withdrew his hand and the flames reverted to hard stone.

The corridor we stood in now – the last corridor, the last barrier to the *Magnus Fontis* only a handful of minutes away – didn't play any games. It was illuminated brightly against the dark in the depths of the earth. Runes of ancient and strange design – near-Atlantean, if only the scholars of years past had but known – shone neon-green and –blue, casting a sickly pall over the widening pathway.

I guess if you make it this far, past six varying barriers, then the overseers of the Great Library dispensed with the secrecy and camouflage. The runes floated across the wall like leaves on water, working some archaic and unknown magic of a different era.

I could feel the lost years of time stretching back century upon century – History herself stored her memories here, and it was blinding, deafening – a storm in a teacup... Damn it all, I was far too sensitive to time. And my head pounded furiously behind my eyes, that damned headache I'd had for over a day solid now.

And there were colours spiralling through my mind – a kaleidoscope of red and blue phasing back and forth, surging like the tide. My head throbbed in beat with the surges. Ah hell, what was going on now?

It was hard to believe that far overhead the modern city of Rome was approaching lunch time. I had the strangest perception, beyond any real means of explanation, that reality had shifted up into fifth gear, that nothing was as it had been, was as it should be. And that I was nothing, absolutely nothing, as insignificant as ash and dust in the spinning clouds of rising, burning chaos.

Fucking time-travel. I think I may have fried more than one or two brain cells travelling back twice within the space of an hour. Fucking demons.

I don't recall much of following Dumbledore down the brightly lit corridor, across slabs of white marble floating suspended on clear water, water as blue as the noon sky, but before long I stood just behind him as the corridor widened into a small, rotund room of old stone.

"The only way back is forward now," Dumbledore said, and his words seemed to carry an air of prophecy.

There was nothing of interest in this circular room at the end of a very long corridor with many, many inconvenient barriers, save the large blocks of stone that, for the first time, looked very clearly like a barrier set into the far wall. Twin bronze statues of tall wizards in flowing robes, beards bushy and imperious, held a single hand forward, palms facing out, denying entrance to all.

Dumbledore strode forward and planted his staff hard against the floor between the two statues. He inclined his head a fraction of an inch and began muttering incantations and old lore under his breath. Smoke rose from the tip of his staff, leaking from the pale blue crystal embedded there, and floated on invisible currents over to the two statues, settling over their eyes and obscuring their cold, metal view.

All at once the dozens of runes and symbols moving across the walls ceased to do so. A pregnant pause, and then the runes rushed at the Seventh Barrier resting in between the two identical statues, flowing into the stone faster and faster until the walls were bare and the solid granite boulder shone with a blinding white light.

Cool special effects, I thought – and the explosions were yet to come.

The light shining from within the Seventh Barrier faded, revealing the first few steps of a marble staircase that descended into darkness. A marble staircase that had existed for over three millennia, give or take a century. Once again, I was about to set foot into history, and for the first time.

“Now, Harry,” Dumbledore said, his voice strangely solemn. “Quickly now, before the Guardians See you.”

Dumbledore’s magical smoke still obscured the eyes of the twin statues, yet it was fading fast.

Together he and I stepped into darkness, breaching the top stairs, and believe me when I say that I was readying for a fight. The *Magnus Fontis* is a library – the Great Library – the greatest on the planet and only a handful of magical folk have access to it, yet none of them understood just what they were privileged to see, what they were unwittingly tasked to keep hidden.

It was nothing noble, nothing awe-inspiring or wonderful. The *Magnus Fontis* was a library, no doubts there, but it was also a *prison*. It kept in chains of hard diamond a creature of the old world, of a kind that had brought Atlantis to its knees.

To my knowledge – and my knowledge is of times gone by and times to come, of futures uncertain and hopeless – what festered in the heart of the *Valde Claustum* of the Library did not belong to this world.

My hazy memories were full of fire – fire and bone. Why did I feel as if I were entering the Mines of Moria with Gandalf the Grey at my side?

You think it’s almost over, but it’s only on the rise... Isn’t that always the way?

Remind me, if you will, exactly what we’re fighting for?

And I remember you – a story that was over before it could begin, are you not? My name is Harry, Harry Potter. Perhaps you’ve heard of

me. I'm the man whose deeds put angels and demons alike to shame...

Only time can defeat time and its all too heavy burdens.

Time is always a paradox – t'is the nature of the Beast.

And that Beast, his name is Legion.

And he is many.

The *Magnus Fontis* stank of damp and rotten parchment, of centuries of inevitable paper decay, and of dewy grass in the early morning. I missed the scent of green apples and white roses, of strawberries and fresh rainfall. And there was a further stink, hanging just below the rot and the damp, of something... *wrong*.

Of something that had *festered*.

You never really get used to coming face to face with monsters that belong only to nightmares, that cloak themselves in shadow and malice. But you can come to use that fear against the *sonofabitch* monster that's out to eat your spleen. Fear isn't a weakness – it's a defence, and getting your head around that is half the battle. The other half is an explosive cocktail of sarcasm and a charming, winning attitude.

Anyway, that *festering-something-wrong*, I could tell in the way that Dumbledore held himself that he could sense it too.

"I'd say it's safe to talk now that no inanimate Guardian statues can hear us," I said, as the Headmaster and I followed the spiral staircase down into the Library proper. I removed my Invisibility Cloak and shoved it back into the briefcase, being careful not to disturb that expensive little item I'd bought back in the *Via Magicka*. Didn't want that breaking – oh boy no, not just yet.

"Indeed," Dumbledore said, surveying me over those half-moon spectacles, his staff held forward against the darkness. "Here we are,

Harry. You stand on the precipice of the Fountain of History – I believe the youngest person to have ever done so.”

“Ah, I’m not that young.” I shrugged. “And I fear my new suit is going to get scuffed and stained down here.”

“I must admit, you cut a striking figure – you’ve had a busy time of it since disappearing yesterday, hmm.”

I grinned, masking it in the shadows dancing across my face from the flickering light. “Not been up to much, Professor. Lunch in France, dinner in Tivoli, breakfast in Rome.”

“Thwarting Death Eater attacks... And all on your own?”

I let the old man see my enigmatic smile this time, as the steps led us down further and further towards the great archives of knowledge. “What happened to your hand, sir?”

“What happened to yours, Harry?”

I was saved from answering, and so was Dumbledore, as we reached the bottom of the wide steps and came to the first level of the *Magnus Fontis*. As had been the case with the corridor leading to the Seventh Barrier, there were runes shining neon-blue, -green, and -red on the heavy bricks of old stone, yet I no longer suffered from the uncomfortable feeling of being several miles underground in a narrow corridor, as before me now stretched a chamber with a ceiling as high and as vaulted as any great cathedral of the world above the surface.

“Echoooo!” I hollered, and my voice echoed up into the far reaches of the Library, reverberating away down the length and breadth of the countless stacks of shelves and dust-ridden archives. “That’s cool.”

“Be on your guard, Harry,” Dumbledore said, his voice just a whisper. “The Great Library is as old as the magical world itself – the knowledge of lifetimes can cast a pall of regret... and of despair.”

“Hmm... that’s pretty old.” *But not that old. Atlantis, Merlin damn it all to hell, is far older.* “We have to get to this *Valde Clastrum*.”

Dumbledore nodded, his gaze once more settling on mine in an unreadable expression that I read perfectly. He suspected me of falsehood. “You say you had a vision through your scar, of Lord Voldemort mentioning a horcrux... Why have I brought you to the *Magnus Fontis*, Harry?”

Oh, good question. “Because the fate of the world depends upon me?” I offered. “Sorry, that sounded really lame. Lame ‘cause its true...”

“What is in the Great Library that *you* want?”

I stopped pretending.

“A Key to the Past,” I said, letting out a long, slow breath. Dumbledore had seen right through me from the start, as was his way, and had brought me here anyway. And in that way I think the old man loved me – who I was and what I... stood for. I was a bastard for doing what I was going to do. “What do you know of Atlantis, Professor?”

For a long moment he said nothing. “Atlantis is myth and legend, dear boy – a fool’s quest for the make-believe.”

“Ah... maybe yes, maybe no – it is certainly a fool’s quest, but a few short years ago the entire magical world was the stuff of make-believe to me, sir.”

“Harry, I—”

“What did Merlin say before the Gates of Avalon over six hundred years ago?” I asked, cutting in quickly. Things weren’t the way they were before. “Before the fires of chaos and war swept that particular island into the abyss?”

Dumbledore was looking at me in a whole new light. “That is guarded history, Harry, how can you possibly know—?”

Heh, well, I knew because once upon a time I’d spent more than a few years absorbing the knowledge available in the *Magnus Fontis*. From ancient to recent history, from spellbooks to ward construction

and all that's in between. I knew because I'd done my fucking homework. Knowledge can only take you so far, though – the rest is luck and experience.

"Merlin said that *'foul beings of Old Times still lurk in dark, forgotten corners of the world, and Gates still gape to loose, on certain nights, shapes pent in Hell'*." I took a deep breath and let it out slow. "He was talking about Atlantis."

"That is speculation and nothing more."

"I can prove it."

Dumbledore clapped the foot of his staff against the cool marble floor tiles hard, sending a shockwave of sound reverberating outward and upward into the high vaulted ceiling. "You've manipulated me, Harry. How did you know of the word Horcrux?"

I scowled – although I may look it, I was no longer some brooding teenage boy. Even before yesterday, even before the past and future collided in my mind, and my eyes bled, leaving me with one fucking killer of a headache, I had been fighting my own battles for years. I thrust my finger towards Dumbledore, angry and incensed.

"You're one to talk of manipulation," I said very, very quietly. I had no memory of having this conversation before. Events were spiralling out of my control. *Why were things so different this time?* "Before I even met you, Professor, you've been steering the course of my life. From Privet Drive to secret snake-filled chambers, from goblets of fire to Grimmauld Place."

"You know the dangers of the world we live in, Harry, far better than most. Anything I have done has been to keep alive, to keep you strong—"

"*I know!*" I said, the words strained and hard. My head was absolutely pounding. "I know, sir, and what I'm doing here, today, with knowledge that I shouldn't have, that has you concerned I'm looking to make a Horcrux and perhaps even the field between myself and Voldemort, is for the same reason." I shook my head. "Only, I'm

working on keeping more than just myself alive..." *Like the whole godforsaken planet.*

His expression truly unreadable, Dumbledore looked away first and gazed out over the stacks and stacks of shelves and storage cabinets illuminated under the glow of soft rune-light. There was knowledge here to make a Horcrux, sure, and magic a helluva lot darker. If there was one thing mankind was good at, it was chronicling the torture of the mind, body, and soul. I could see Dumbledore deciding whether or not to allow me to proceed to the *Valde Claustum*, knowing the danger that existed between here and there, written in a million old tomes.

"Haven't I earned the benefit of the doubt, Professor?" I whispered. As I was now, still reeling from the effects of the time-travel, and relatively new to all this *memory*, he could probably stop me if it came to drawing wands. Mine was burning a hole in my top pocket. "Trust me on this..."

And as if those were the magic words, Dumbledore turned back around to face me. "And you must promise me the same, Harry – we will go on to the *Valde Claustum*, for whatever ends you seek to prove the existence of Atlantis – but after that we shall return to England, to the protection of the Order."

I opened my mouth to protest but caught myself. It didn't really matter, one way or another, I was gonna piss all over Dumbledore's trust in the next hour or so anyways... I nodded slowly, weighing up my options. It would be some long weeks before I returned to the United Kingdom, and when I did it would be in a way no one *could* expect.

An uneasy silence fell between myself and the Headmaster. I followed him across the wide marble floor, staying just within the sphere of light cast by his staff, and together we descended towards the *Valde Claustum*.

Knowledge, acquired and stored knowledge, is what makes the world turn, and the human race progress. We record our history, our innovations and discoveries, and the next generation builds on that – from the ability to start a fire to the wheel, from dynamite to the atomic bomb – we go on, and on, with the wealth of history behind us.

Dumbledore and I descended through the most accurate archives of preserved knowledge on the planet.

And it still stank of mildew and rotting decay.

At the end of the great cathedral chamber there was another set of steps, carpeted with faded, moth-eaten red velvet that led deeper yet underground, spiralling and spiralling away into darkness. Heh, aren't we all spiralling the same way?

I expected the air to thin and expire at any moment, yet an old ventilation system churned away out of sight – something to do with the runes shining on the walls. As I said, they were old – near-Atlantean script – and an offshoot of a completely different class of magic from that which we use today, with wands and incantations.

"May I ask, Harry," Dumbledore said, breaking our awkward silence as we descended down to the next level of the Library, "have you shared the words of the prophecy with your friends?"

"No, sir," I said. *And either must die at the hand of the other...* Death was nothing, nothing at all. One day I'll kill him – one day I'll be good enough, fast enough, to stop him before he annihilates the whole world just to teach me a lesson.

"You do not have to bare this burden alone, dear boy..."

"With all due respect, Professor, yes I do."

We came to a chamber much similar to the first, although with a ceiling not quite as high. The first-floor with the cathedral-like harmonics was now above our heads, and there were many more floors like this to go – with dozens of even larger rooms breaking off in different directions – all of them containing archives of old books and scrolls, knowledge and history. Again, the only light came from the neon runes floating across the walls, and that which was created by Dumbledore – it was enough.

"I do not think it likely at all that Miss Granger or Mr Weasley would abandon you, Harry, should they know the extent of the path destiny has set before Tom Riddle and yourself."

“Ah, well,” I said, running my burnt hand back through my hair. The salve I’d purchased at the apothecary had done wonders for the skin, but it still looked pretty nasty and sore. “It’s not so much that – they would stick by me – I just don’t want to paint a big target on either of their backs... a bigger target. I’ll share the prophecy, sooner or later, when I know I can protect them well enough.”

Dumbledore stroked his long silvery beard with that blackened hand of his, full of a curse that would claim his life within a year. His skeletal fingers barely twitched. “Whatever you hope to find down here, Harry, it does not do to dwell on legend and myth... “

I thought about that as we moved across the room, keeping to the centre of the chamber and passing the long rows of aged wooden shelves on either side.

“Does the name Saturnia mean anything to you, Headmaster?” I asked, steering the conversation away from Atlantis and the immediate future.

“I am not sure I follow, Harry, why do you ask?”

I shook my head, trying to keep my thoughts straight through that mind-numbing headache. I was about ready to crack my head open and let all the pressure pressing my eyes against my skull ooze out. “I get the feeling I’ve forgotten something, and that something is on the tip of my tongue but I can’t quite... see it. Who or what is Saturnia?”

Dumbledore was clearly becoming more and more curious about the changes in me since last we met, way back when I had my temper tantrum and trashed his office. Years ago – a few short weeks – and all the lost time in between. Whole worlds can flare and die in that magical heartbeat between one moment and the next.

“Saturnia in Roman mythology, Harry, was the goddess of Time. She appeared as a woman of unrivalled beauty who was there to settle grave accounts between mortals and archaic deities.”

“Unrivalled beauty?” I said, thinking of the old crone with the yellow teeth I’d met on the docks. One would have to be really, *really* drunk to consider barking up that tree. “She was a... a debt collector?”

"I suppose, in a way," Dumbledore mused, shrugging his thin shoulders. "Yet Saturn, Saturnia – and her Greek partner, Cronos – guarded the sanctity of time itself. Again nothing but the makings of myth and legend. Time is a river of fate and mingled destiny that flows forever in one direction, Harry."

I scowled. Any mention of time always made me twitch. Time was *mine*. "Time is not a river," I said, and I'd come to believe that – somewhere, *somewhen*. "Time is an ocean caught in a storm, Professor."

To that Dumbledore said nothing.

As we had been doing for pretty much the last hour, Albus Dumbledore and I headed down. I didn't like to think how far below the bright sunny surface world we might be, and how quick we were moving towards something that my throbbing, hazy mind told me was fire and shadow and bone and anger... *Sumfin' a'festaring...*

It was coming up for eleven o'clock in the morning. 10:57 and thirty-three seconds, if you must know. Time in this dank library was measured in millennia, however, and the soft ticking of the nice watch I'd bought off a hotel clerk in Tivoli seemed far too hurried.

The levels of the *Magnus Fontis* that looked like any traditional old library, books and everything, lasted another three descents down spiralling sets of steps, all carpeted in that thin red fabric that had waited out the centuries for my arrival.

The dark stone that comprised the walls and the ceiling gave way to a lighter granite, the sooty-grey colour of ash, and marble floors that still held some of their lustre. Those archaic symbols, glowing those painful neon colours, were floating faster and faster on the walls and across the floor, perhaps working overtime to counteract some latent power in the beast we were heading towards. It was a creature of great strength and... deceit, and the long millenniums imprisoned in the Library had only served to hone its wild anger into a fine, furious point.

"The Hall of the Dream Wind..." Dumbledore said, beaming excitedly.

There was more in the greatest library on the planet than just rotting old parchment. Dumbledore and I entered the first chamber made of the new lighter stone, and in our ears the tunes of a thousand forgotten melodies swam for the first time in a long time.

“Nice,” I whispered.

An invisible breeze blew my hair back from my forehead, fresh and cool, and fell in waves over ancient instruments and music boxes of ages gone by. Wind chimes and flutes, old bells and finely strung guitars... The wind pounded on drums, plucked at wooden lutes and whistled through the grooves and gaps of harps and trumpets in wondrous fashion.

All the instruments stretched on across the length and breadth of the chamber, some of them disappearing into darkness in the far corners. It was the largest orchestra in the world, played by a single gust of perpetual wind.

“Music,” Dumbledore said, smiling fondly. “Ah, sweet music – the power in words, Harry, in the naming of things is tremendous. Music is the very *soul* of magic.”

“Yeah,” I said. *It was a big ol’ orgasm of sound.* “I wanna get lost in the rock’n’roll and drift away, too, but the world needs saving...”

“Too true, dear boy, too true – onward we fare?” He winked at me behind those half-moon spectacles.

“You want me to lead the way?” I asked, genuinely surprised.

“You know the way.” And that wasn’t a question.

I thought about it for a moment and then nodded. “Yeah... yeah I kinda do.”

“One day you must tell me how. Every adventure needs an attentive audience, Harry.”

I took a second to reply. *Could I ever tell Dumbledore about the time-travel? About the price I had to pay...? Maybe yes, maybe no...*

maybe I'd have to, should we survive this time. "It's not a nice story," I said quietly. "It's not a happy adventure."

"The ones that are worth it... well they never are, dear boy."

"Truth," I replied, coughing to clear my throat. I found a smile that felt a little like a grimace. "Onward we fare..."

It was 11:15 and forty-two seconds. Not far to go now. The *Valde Claustum* – the Great Cloister – was a proverbial stone's throw away.

The next chamber down was full of amazing glass statues. They depicted men and women, animals and buildings that had been blasted into so much ash through the ravages of time. The light from the runes sparkled through the glass, highlighting the white rose petals speckled through the majority of the statues, tinted with pure gold and studded with diamonds.

It was dazzling, it was beautiful – and it was priceless. I led the way through the statues and took a turn to the left, Dumbledore following in my wake as I swept through my memories of this place. I could remember the way to the *Valde Claustum* well enough.

As we approached the heart of the Great Library the huge chambers began to dwindle, becoming smaller and more specific in what they stored. It reminded me of the many rooms in the Department of Mysteries. There were rooms of tiny gold objects that radiated strange strength – deposits of magic – and rooms of books too hazardous to be kept in the general stacks, less the energies surrounding the dark tomes take on some semblance of life...

Dumbledore eyed most of them with a hard frown and a look of deep mistrust.

Moving through a room of eternally-sharp swords, sheathed in dusty leather scabbards and bracketed on the wall, I hesitated and thought about taking one of the blades for myself. Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the two demon-boys, had weapons of their own. I was sure I hadn't seen the last of those two, no matter how well I'd kicked their ass last night.

I weighed up the pros and cons, and how much I'd have to tell Dumbledore, and decided against it. I'd stick to what I knew, for now, which for the main event coming up in about five minutes was magic.

BOOM!

Just before we left the room began to shake and the marble beneath my feet rumbled. A few of the swords bracketed on the walls broke free and fell loose, clattering loudly on the floor. The symbols and runes floating across the walls began to spin and spin, faster than the eye could follow.

BOOM!

Again the whole room trembled, and sparks of raw energy flew from the neon runes.

"Eh... this can't be good, can it?" I said. The vibrations seemed to be rippling outwards from somewhere ahead. I had no memory of this happening before.

Dumbledore looked troubled. "There is a path that leads back to the surface, Harry, in the *Valde Claustum*. It is the nearest path out of the Library and back up to the International Confederation. I suggest we hurry – something is amiss in the *Magnus Fontis*."

"Alright," I said, being quite amiable.

I was leaving the Library another way, however – and it was a way the old man couldn't follow. I had not been lying when I said I could prove the existence of Atlantis. Deep within the *Valde Claustum* was the first key to solving that particular riddle. And funnily enough, the key was actually a *portkey* – made over three thousand years ago.

BOOM!

Centuries of dust clinging to the rafters and between the gaps in the stone broke loose and dirtied my expensive suit. Damn... Fleur would be most unimpressed.

"Come quickly, Harry."

We moved faster through the last few chambers and winding corridors, passed strange ornaments and old hardwood furniture, cabinets of books and scrolls, alongside further medieval weaponry. Those damn runes were making me dizzy, spinning and spinning around the walls, trying to contain and counter whatever was pounding against the very foundations of the *Magnus Fontis*.

As quickly as it had started it stopped.

The corridor we were in shook a few more times, complete with those thunderous, echoing *booms*, before all fell silent and the dust settled. Dumbledore looked at me, and I shrugged.

“We’re here,” I said, gesturing down to the end of the corridor and the light that spilled out into the wide round chamber beyond. “The *Valde Claustrum*.”

I had a bad feeling about this. I checked my wand in my top pocket, and the reassuring weight of my briefcase. If all went to plan then... well, there’d be a cool explosion and one dead festering monster.

At the end of the corridor Dumbledore and I stepped out and down into a wide bowl-shaped room that shone faintly blue, the light reflecting off the narrow canals of water that ran in circles at its edge and the base of the walls. This was the heart of the *Magnum Fontis*, and also the source of the strange glowing runes on every single wall in the whole damn place.

High up overhead in the conical ceiling, in the centre of the room, was a large sphere of pure white light. Runes and flashing symbols flowed out along the ceiling from this sphere, down the walls and out of sight.

Also in the centre of the room, directly below the shiny rune-sphere, was a small pyramid of blue marble about four feet high that ended in a thin rounded spike, pointed straight towards the brilliant silver-white sphere.

There was a pair of double doors to the left of the entrance that supposedly led back into the tunnels and pathways above. Running like a maze up to the surface, according to Dumbledore. I’d never

been that way, so I couldn't be sure. It was how the old man would get out.

Other than that, there was nothing here but an empty room – save for the sphere of magic and the marble pyramid topped with a blunt spike.

And yet I felt watched. I felt... expected.

The Ring of Concealment on my index finger seemed to itch and burn.

"Here you are, Harry," Dumbledore said, gesturing widely at the pale blue room. "There is nothing here, I'm afraid."

I took a few steps across the room towards the tiny pyramid. I spun the Ring of Concealment around on my finger with my thumb, thinking half a dozen steps ahead. I'd known it from previous jumps through time, and the goblins had confirmed it, the ring was of Atlantean make. This was the best way I knew of doing what had to be done.

Merlin damn it all... I turned to face Dumbledore, who stood just behind me leaning on his wizened old warlock staff. "Do you know how old the *Magnum Fontis* is, Professor?"

"Harry, we have to leave... there is power stirring – look at the runes."

The neon runes... they were bars to a cell, and the strain on them was buckling and twisting that cell. Something was different, couldn't help that, but this still needed to be done.

"It's three thousand or so years old. A long time..." I stared at Dumbledore, and through him, back across time to the age of Atlantis, and the foul armies of hell from the netherworlds that had torn it down. A war that had been quick and sure... and bloodier than any conflict since, save the one that was to come.

I missed Tonks – I missed Fleur. In my throbbing head I cared for them both more than worlds and time and tearing Atlantis from Voldemort's grasp. And yet I was only fifteen... what chance did I have to save the world, let alone get the girl...

“Harry—”

“It was built by the last of an ancient race of magical folk, sir,” I continued, and slipped the Ring of Concealment from my finger and into my palm, clutching it tight. “Built to contain and store the knowledge of a world that had moved on – a dangerous reason, a *fucking stupid* reason. This place is a prison for more than just books and trinkets.”

“What has happened to you, Harry?” Dumbledore’s voice was solemn... solemn and... afraid? No – Dumbledore was never afraid, not even when he was killed... was he?

“The future happened,” I replied. I stood before the pyramid, glaring at the narrow rounded spike embedded in its apex. “This Great Library, Professor, was built to contain the bane of Atlantis – shadow and bone – which in turn was imprisoned here to guard the first piece of the puzzle that could lead a couple of deft adventurers such as ourselves to what remains of the Atlantean nation – its capital city, the Lost City of Atlantis.”

And with that, I shoved the Ring of Concealment down over the tip of the spike jutting up from the pyramid. It was a perfect fit until the spike became wider than the band, and the Key to the prison cell before me clicked into place, and began to turn...

The hallmark on the Ring – the mark of Atlantis, that ancient symbol for eternity – began to shine gold and lines of power flowed up through the body of the pyramid before me, flooding into the ring. A sickly beam of purple light erupted from the Ring and shot towards the far wall – dispelling the mass of runes that reinforced the physical barrier of the jail cell.

The purple light spread across the length and breadth of the far wall – and devoured forty feet of thick stone that had stood in place for over three millennia. As the light faded, a hollow tunnel stood revealed in its wake. Air that had stagnated over the long centuries washed over me and stung my eyes.

“The *Valde Claustrum* was a padlock, Professor, on the world’s most elaborate prison.”

Dumbledore had cast aside his staff and now held his wand firmly in the grip of his good hand, his eyes staring unblinking into the total darkness of the tunnel before us. That sense of being watched, of being expected, had not abated.

“It’s okay,” I said, plucking the Ring of Concealment from the pyramid spike and placing it back on my finger. “The creature is imprisoned in chains of diamond and iron—”

BOOM!

“HARRY JAMES POTTER!”

It came roaring out of the dark tunnel on four legs of hard bone that ended in three hook-clawed talons, stained dark brown with the blood of so long ago. At least twenty feet tall, its body made entirely of jointed dark bone, the creature brought with it a cloak of darkest shadow – smoke and clouds of hideous power. Its head was thin and covered in the only flesh that remained on the creature – two fat, grotesque eyes that spun in its skull.

Hmm, well. Okay.

“Harry...” Dumbledore breathed. “Dear Merlin, what have you done?”

I scoured my memories but came up with nothing. This demonic beast, this shape pent in Hell, this foul-ass motherfucker, should have been chained to the *godforsaken* wall within the chamber beyond the tunnel, a guardian of secrets long forgotten.

Heh, things just keep happening differently... how was this possible?

“Well, when in Rome, Professor...”

The past cannot be redeemed.

Baby, I’ve heard that before...

Whoa... déjà vu!

Is there anyone out there who can hear me? There isn't much time – story of my life, I know – but seriously, we're down to minutes here.

I failed.

I lost.

Everybody lost...

And I lied. I lied because... I liked it – I could pretend, just for a moment, that you haven't died in my arms more times than I can honestly remember through this fucking headache.

I could pretend that I could grow old, that I could die and move on. Aw hell, I lied, honey, and I'm sorry.

But you're too dead to hear that...

"Potter."

Oh...

Shit.

The voice was low and sinuous, as penetrating as it was terrifying.

"Potter..." the creature spat, its voice grating and grating and bouncing around inside my skull.

"That's me," I said, inclining my head. "A pleasure to meet you."

The beast stood just in the darkness of the tunnel across the chamber. Thick shadow encased most of its form. I placed my briefcase against the side of the pyramid and undid the clasp, making sure the item I'd purchased at the *Via Magicka* that morning was well within reach.

The demon snarled. **"Time Warrior – the stink of Atlantis mars your very soul. Arrogant enough to free me, and it will be your unmaking."**

Free you? “Oh I don’t know about that, ugly,” I said, drawing my wand and flexing my arm. “You see, I’m the best that’s ever been – you’re toast, mate, burnt toast. I’m simply the best. Set your watch and warrant on it.”

The monster roared – the fetid stink of its breath, even from across the chamber, was nearly enough to knock me out – and charged toward us, the fury and fires of hell itself dancing within the emotionless black orbs of its eyes. It tore up the marble and stone beneath it as it cut the distance, flinging chunks of rock to all sides.

“Professor,” I cried, taking big leaps away from Dumbledore. “Fire – use fire. Lots and lots of fire. *INCENDIO!*”

A coil of flame as hot and as pure as I could make it whipped out of my wand and sucked up all the oxygen in the air between myself and the rampaging shadow-demon thing. It had a name, a proper name, but I couldn’t remember...

It was fast, and its reflexes hadn’t been dulled at all from three thousand years spent imprisoned half a dozen miles below the ground. Still, I was fast too, and my jet of super-hot flame took it in the chest, slamming through the clouds of dark shadow that surrounded the beast and penetrating its bony hide.

The flame knocked the demon back, sent it off course and reeling into the wall, buying me a few precious seconds to assess this all too fucked-up situation.

I’d faced this monster before, yet it had always been chained and imprisoned. It didn’t have much room to manoeuvre in the *Valde Claustum*. I could be faster and more agile. In order to get the kill-shot in I’d have to work fast—

A thick column of flame rushed past me, the heat incredible and otherworldly. It slammed into the demon just as it rose to its full height and roared challenge and fury down upon me. The fire knocked it back into the wall, creating a plume of shadow and dust, and I followed the column of flame back to its source.

I laughed wildly, rubbing at my forehead with my sore hand. “I think you singed my eyebrows, Professor!” I called over the demon’s continued bellows of rage.

Dumbledore did not spare a moment to offer an apology.

I rushed back over to the small pyramid and dug down into my briefcase, shuffling through the folds of the Invisibility Cloak and drawing from the bottom of the case the warm glass sphere that had cost me near three hundred galleons just an hour or two ago. I tucked it carefully under my arm as Dumbledore’s stream of fire ran out, and turned back to face the demon.

Scorched and smoking, stinking of charred bone and inhuman fury, I caught it staring right at me. I smiled and winked. “Brought you a little present, ugly!” I shouted, and raised the glass sphere over my head.

Dumbledore gasped. “Harry, is that a—?”

“You’re damn right it is!”

Wordlessly – using non-verbal magic I didn’t know I knew – I took a hold of the glass sphere with a levitation charm and *fired* it like a cannonball straight at the demon’s head.

“Harry, no, the dragon’s fire will—”

The demon snapped its head forward and closed its jaws around the sphere, snarling and growling. Its long fanged teeth crunched and shattered the crystal ball – unleashing the power in its core.

There was a long drawn out second in which I stood with my teeth bared, scowling at the creature of bone and shadow. Then Dumbledore’s good hand came down on my shoulder, pulling me back behind the mini-pyramid in an attempt to shield—

BOOM!

The demon’s head exploded in a wave of solid blue flame – and a good chunk of the wall and ceiling went with it. Super-hot fire, the

kind that burns in the belly of a dragon, blossomed outwards from its mouth in a star of destructive heat.

Searing away most of its bony form and sending splinters of marble, rock and bone, complete in a cloud of dust, shooting across the *Valde Claustum*, the demon crumpled – defeated before it could really stretch its legs

Dumbledore and I were crouched down on the safe side of the pyramid in the heart of the chamber, and we were enveloped in the cloud of hot dust. I closed my eyes tight and covered my face with my arm, waiting for it to settle. Flecks of marble and bone stung and drew blood from my exposed skin.

“Well that didn’t take long,” I said, digging the dust out of my ears and wondering how long it would take for the ringing to disappear. I stood and offered Dumbledore my hand.

“Dragon’s Fire, Harry?”

I shrugged. “Had a feeling I’d be needing some...”

The glass sphere that had contained the dragon’s fire wasn’t overly fragile. Magical folk used them all the time as a source of heat, to warm a home in winter, and keep the water hot. They last ages – years before being depleted. It took a lot to shatter one – like the awesome power in the jaws of a shadow demon – and the release of that much heat energy all at once could be devastating, much like an explosion of gas.

“Can’t say it didn’t get the job done...”

The dust had settled on what remained of the shadow demon, which amounted to less than a pile of bones. One hooked claw pointed towards me defiantly from under a mass of rock that had been part of the ceiling and far wall. *Did not understand who it was fucking with...*

“This was reckless, Harry,” Dumbledore said, and no longer was he grandfatherly or kind. There were chips of marble in his beard, and a curtain of dust covered his sweeping robes. He was barely concealing his anger.

“Reckless is as reckless does, sir. I’m alive, you’re alive, monster is dead. We can call it a win.”

“You know what it was.”

I nodded. “Merlin was the last to see one of its kind, back in Avalon some six centuries ago. This guy was just a foot soldier compared to the nightmare Merlin defeated. It was creatures like this, and their masters, that annihilated the Atlantean nation. Goblins call them the *Scourge*. I can’t remember what they call themselves...”

“Where does it come from?”

I shrugged my shoulders and let out a deep breath. “Long Ago,” I said. “Can’t say for sure... I was told once that they come from the space between worlds, between life and death, through Gates that lead into a void...” I laughed – bitter and beyond my years. “It’s easier just to say Hell, really, than the space between worlds.”

I left Dumbledore pondering that, his face grim and strangely determined, and collected my briefcase. The fine leather had been scratched and marred by the dust and debris from the explosion. I shook it clean as best I could and headed for the tunnel that the demon had emerged from all shadowy and evil.

It was dark and stank of things that were best left unmentioned. I raised my wand and muttered a small charm, wondering on the non-verbal casting I’d managed in the heat of the moment. I’d have to practice that, once things calmed down a little... Fleur had invited me back Thursday – might be something to have a look at then.

“Harry,” Dumbledore called to me from the *Valde Claustrum*.

The tunnel was short and ended in a small round chamber that held the remains of the bonds that had imprisoned the creature so far below the earth for centuries. Chains of diamond and iron, forged in magical fire, could not have been broken by this demon alone. It had to be magic – could only be magic – that had eaten through the chains.

But who had been down here before me?

My future memories were disturbingly silent... I wondered upon Tweedledum and Tweedledee, but this wasn't their style, really. The old woman Saturnia? She was a new factor as well. Who was the asshole that had set the demon upon me?

Damn it all... the demon shouldn't have been freed. Although I'd managed to dispatch it without too much trouble. My expensive suit was dirty though, which pissed me off extremely...

The chamber was dry and there was a small hole in the wall. It was this gap that the demon had been set to guard three millenniums ago. Beyond lay the last and final chamber of the *Magnus Fontis*, and what I had come here for.

I put my briefcase down on a coil of broken diamond chain. It wasn't a large gap – Dumbledore would be too big to fit – and I had to squat down and pull myself through with my free hand, my wand held before me lighting the way. There was a narrow set of about fifteen steps and once through the hole in the wall there was enough room to stand up. I headed down the steps on my guard, expecting something to go balls-up just around the corner.

There was no fancy marble or stone walls reinforced with magical neon runes down here – this chamber was a natural cave within the earth, small and cramped and dripping dirty water from the ceiling. Stalactites formed over the centuries forced me to duck more than once, and the air was thin and stale.

It was only about forty feet deep as well before the walls narrowed abruptly to a point – a dead end. The pale light from my wand fell on something at the base of the rocky cavern wall.

The small chest embedded into the rock at my feet was what I had come for. It was arguably the most important thing concealed within the depths of the *Magnus Fontis*. The first clue, for those dumb and brave enough to bother, that led to Atlantis.

I knelt down and lifted the lid off, tossing it aside and shining my wand light down into the shallow chest.

There were two items.

And one of them was not what I was expecting.

A nervous shudder rushed right through me and I looked back over my shoulder, expecting a surprise attack.

There was nothing but darkness and the slow *drip-drip-drip* of water that would never see daylight.

I removed the item I had been expecting, that had been placed here three thousand years ago by a man who had designed the maze of riddles and traps, of clues and false-trails, that led to the Lost City. On a strong chain of white gold, suspended in a small gyroscope, was a tiny golden hourglass that sparkled in the light.

A Time-Turner.

The last time I'd seen one had been in the Department of Mysteries, running from Death Eaters, and the first and last time I'd used one had been in my third-year, to save Buckbeak and free Sirius. This Time-Turner was a little different to the toys the Ministry kept under strict control. For one thing, it could manipulate time for more than a few hours...

I slipped the chain over my head and tucked the small hourglass down the front of my shirt, hiding the magical time device.

I looked back into the chest in that cold narrow cave and removed the only other thing in there – a scrap of folded parchment. I had been expecting a small silver coin, minted in Atlantis with the ancient symbol of eternity. A coin that in reality was a portkey – my ticket out of this hole six miles below the ground without Dumbledore.

The parchment had been folded in half, and then half again. It felt and looked new – not like it had been gathering dust for millenniums on end. There was a message scrawled upon it in a familiar hand. It read... well, it read:

Dear Harry,

I owe you one portkey.

Love,

Harry

I stood there blinking like an idiot for a second... It was my handwriting. How had it ended up in a chest that hadn't been opened for three thousand years? What the fudgin' hell?

Then I thought about it for a moment, the Time-Turner feeling rather heavy around my neck, and it all made sense.

"Bugger," I whispered. "Aw, bugger..."

I'd left my briefcase up in the demon's chamber, so I navigated my way back through the dripping cave and up the narrow stone steps. I could still get the portkey, just in a bit of a roundabout way.

"There you are," Dumbledore said as I emerged from between the gap in the wall. "What did you find down there, Harry?"

I collected my briefcase – I'd need the documents and cash again before too long, as well as my Invisibility Cloak – and dusted off the shoulders of my fine jacket. It was no use – I just smudged the dirt in. "Do you think he can be killed, Professor, if we get all the Horcruxes?"

"How do you know about that, Harry?" Dumbledore shook his head, looking old and fragile as he leaned against his staff. Coils of dark diamond chain littered the floor around us both.

"I made a choice, sir, because there was no one else left to make it." Oh and didn't that bring a thousand haunting memories to the forefront of my mind?

"After this morning, I feel as if I have never really met you, Harry."

I blinked and looked at the old man. He looked back at me warily, uncertain and curious. The smell of dragon's fire was still hot on the air, almost sulphuric and acrid. It was about time I got on with the day.

“When all is said and done, someone must stop the madness. Don’t you agree?”

“Someone is helping you, guiding you – someone who has intimate knowledge of magical history.”

“I work alone – less collateral damage that way.”

“We will discuss this further, Harry, once we have you back home in England.”

“I’m sorry, Professor, but it’s my turn now...”

“Harry, you promised. I must insist—” Dumbledore raised his wand against me, and I could see in his eyes what it cost him to do that.

“I’m sorry, sir,” I said, taking a step back and grasping the Time-Turner around my neck. “Whatever happens, just know that I’m always on your side. *Always*.” I smiled, as carefree as I could manage. “Stay safe, Professor Dumbledore.”

I flicked the tiny hourglass with my finger and sent the sands of time spinning back an hour.

The world dissolved and my headache exploded in a fresh wave of raw pain. I screamed but the howling wind and the blur of colours and shapes rushing past me drowned out my voice. Warm blood trickled into my mouth, coppery and fresh, from my nose.

Suddenly the hard floor was back under my feet, and I fell to my knees as the pounding in my head threatened to knock me out cold. It hurt – oh dear Merlin it hurt – and the blood flowing into my mouth wasn’t just from my nose, but from the corners of my eyes as well.

Ah, time-travel, she was a harsh mistress.

A deep growl brought me back to my senses, and I looked up from my position on the ground, as all at once I realised what I’d done. I found my feet and took a few hurried steps back.

I was staring into the lifeless eyes of the demon I'd just killed. Only it wasn't a hundred percent dead anymore. Fuck. Round two so soon? At least the Time-Turner had done its job and taken me back an hour.

The demon was stirring. It was chained to the wall, thank Merlin for small favours, yet the shadow-smoke had begun to form and swirl around the thick heavy bones that made up its hide. Those dead eyes of lifeless black light began to swivel, and the low growl became a snarl as it realised I was here.

"Hey there, big guy," I said, checking to see that the chains of diamond and iron were firmly in place.

"**Time Warrior** the creature said, possibly the first words it had spoken in three thousand years. They got into my head and made my eye twitch.

"That's me," I said. "Harry James Potter, Lord of Time."

"**Release me.**"

I felt the wave of compulsion wash over me and sink its claws into my mind. The demon was in my head, convincing me to set it free. I blocked its attempt with the same ease that had allowed me to shake off the Imperius Curse.

"**Release me!**"

It was more insistent this time and less persuasive. "Um... no."

Only I must do, I thought. I was an hour in the past – Dumbledore and I would still be navigating our way through the Seven Barriers that guarded the main entrance to the *Magnus Fontis* – yet somehow when we arrive in the *Valde Clastrum* and I open the secret passage with the Ring of Concealment, the demon is free.

Flexing the chains as far as it could, the demon leaned forward only a few inches and *screamed* at me, a wave of that fetid breath threatening to hammer me down into the ground.

“Time has marked you, boy. It stains your very soul. You should not be this side of the Gate, amongst the mortal realms of the living.”

“I’m here for Atlantis, ugly.”

At the mention of the Lost City the creature roared again and threw itself against the thick bands of diamond chain that held it prisoner against the wall in a fury, struggling to reach me. Thick foam gushed from between the demon’s fangs. It was drooling in its anger and lust to destroy me.

Had it really only been twenty-four hours since I’d been cruising down an old French canal with Fleur Delacour? Sipping white wine and eating fine pasta?

“You will release me!”

I needed to get past the demon and through the gap in the wall that led down to the chest where I’d found the Time-Turner and the note from myself. It all made sense now. The portkey would still be there, because I’d jumped an hour into the past to give Dumbledore the slip. I’d use the portkey before I arrived in about an hour and killed this bastard, and leave myself a little I.O.U.

Not too confusing... damn time-travel. It hurt like all hell these days, and made my eyes bleed.

There were thick chains blocking the hole in the wall down into the cave, pulled taut across the entrance. The demon’s bonds blocked the hole completely. The only way through would be to blast through the chains—

Ah, okay.

Well, I’d finally caught up.

“In about an hour I’m going to kill you, big fella,” I said to the demon. “You’ve been waiting three thousand years, another sixty or so minutes shouldn’t faze you.”

“I will remember your face, Time Warrior, and when I am free you will be hunted. My brethren will return and we will quench our thirst with the blood of humanity—”

“I done told you once, you *sonofabitch*, I’m the best that’s ever been!” I laughed. “*Devil Went Down to Georgia* – you know it? It’s a *fucking* classic. *INCENDIOS GRATA!*”

I sent a raw blast of fire-magic at the diamond chains and broke the iron links between them, simultaneously freeing the monster and clearing the path down into the cave.

“FOOL!”

I took a running leap and dived at the gap between the chains, and the demon writhed and snapped the remainder of its weakened bonds, using the broken ends of its chains like a whip to cut me in half.

The fiery-red chains missed me by an inch and I tumbled down through the gap in the wall, landing hard on my shoulder and going head over heels into the wall. I bounced off it none too gently and continued my descent before collapsing in a sore and tired heap at the base of the steps.

“Ow...” I managed, chuckling and groaning. “Ow...” I took a breath, shaking away the pain. “Heh, I’m the asshole that freed the demon. Good luck, Harry.”

Up above the demon roared and sent a single talon searching into the wall, clawing for me. A tremendous *boom* shook the whole cave, followed by another and another as the demon tried to get at me, pounding against the walls of its cell. Given enough time, it would probably break free. Yet I was on my way to take care of that, as well.

Back down at the end of the cave I opened the chest again and looked inside – there was the Time-Turner and what I’d been hoping to see an hour from now, a small silver coin marked with the symbol for Atlantis. The portkey.

I left the Time-Turner where it was so that Harry an hour from now could come back and free the demon. I reached for the portkey coin. Just before I touched it I pulled my hand back. I thought of a good idea – a funny way to screw with myself. From within my briefcase I withdrew a scrap of parchment and a ballpoint pen, and wrote myself a note.

Dear Harry,

I owe you one portkey.

Love,

Harry

I folded it in half and then half again, and placed it down next to the Time-Turner in the chest. I'd find it soon enough. I levitated the portkey out of the chest so I could put the lid firmly back in place, and then made sure I had all my bits and pieces – briefcase, the Time-Turner around my neck, Ring of Concealment.

Good to go.

Without any further ado I picked up the small silver coin and felt that old familiar tug behind my navel.

Onward I fared.

A/N: Well there you have it. Harry's now armed and dangerous with a Time-Turner and off to Merlin knows where on a portkey. The stage has pretty much been set now – so expect the next few chapters to progress the story further than a single day. Also expect to see multiple Harry's kickin' ass all over the place, and all at the same time, and the return of a few familiar faces, and a few new faces.

Thanks again to all the reviewers – what do you reckon to the story now? Good, bad? Still withholding judgement?

All the best, reader,

joe

Chapter 8 – Better Left Unsaid

*The first man to see an illusion by which
men have flourished for centuries surely
stands in a lonely place.*

--Zukav

Time.

Five minutes before tomorrow.

Five minutes past yesterday.

Is it beer o'clock yet?

Truer words of wisdom never spoken – let it be, let it be...

You should know something before we continue. You have a right to know, after all. I'm not... I'm not a 'good guy' – far from it – I'm not innocent, I'm guilty. And whilst that may not be a good thing, it is a necessary thing.

Terrible, yet necessary.

Because only the truly guilty understand what it means to wield true power.

*People call me a hero – perhaps you do as well – yet what is a hero? Someone who acts when all else turns to dust? Someone that you hang your last scraps of hope to and **pray** that they don't buckle? Someone to fight the monsters and make the bad men go away?*

I'm not a hero – I don't have the defiance, or the soul, or a cool mythical sword – no, I'm not a hero.

But I do fight the monsters, because I detest them, and hate that they exist. And what do I have to show for it? For lives spent and spent again battling the worst this world can throw at me?

A bastard of a headache, and that's about it.

Heh, I can hear the gentle whining of a thousand violins. Aw hell – its five o'clock somewhere.

I appeared on my knees in a courtyard of stone beneath a roof of sparkling starlight.

I let out a small groan as the old magic in the portkey spat me out halfway across the world and aching from head to toe. The small silver coin, minted in Atlantis, had been gathering dust deep beneath Rome for three thousand years. Even for magic as simple as a portkey, that was a long time.

It had made for a bumpy ride, as the enchantment on the coin had faded over time – and the world had moved on in the three millennia since the map to Atlantis was set. A few more centuries and the map would have been lost forever, yet that wasn't meant to be.

I gained my feet and looked about myself, standing ragged in my torn suit and straightening my glasses across the bridge of my nose. Just where in the world was I now? I knew all too well, unfortunately.

I was in the heart of Mt. Everest, buried deep within thousands and thousands of tonnes of earth, rock and ice.

Yeah, I know, groovy.

Whisked away from one underground tomb in the *Magnus Fontis* and straight into another. I hadn't been lying when I said there were secrets buried in the lost, deep places of the world – most of them led to one end, and that end was Atlantis. A greater mind than I, the last mind of the Atlantean nation, had developed this ancient, buried road long before the foundations of Hogwarts had been laid.

The only reason I'd been able to decipher its route was because I had lives to spare. Hell, it had taken me more than one try to get this far, yet I could recall most of the way with crystal-clear clarity. Some things, like things we die for, are burnt into our minds for ever.

So I was deep within the highest mountain in the world, and yet there was a blanket of starlight overhead...

The courtyard I stood in was long and wide, arching with old limestone blocks that were crumbling and pockmarked from centuries of decay. It was freezing, a thin sheet of ice covered much of everything. I was careful with my footing, lest I fall on my arse.

Swirling across the jagged ceiling, flowing over the long pointed stalactites and heavy, fat icicles, was a blanket of dark fog speckled with points of bright, silver light, spinning and churning like the very centre of a star-strewn galaxy. Constellations of starlight and dust surged like waves on an unruly sea, washing up on the clustered sands of time...

It was eerily beautiful. A sight one could get lost in, as it stretched for a good quarter mile in all directions. I stood staring at it for about five minutes before I noticed my teeth chattering, and my hands going slowly numb. It was pretty damn cold.

I pulled my eyes back down to the matter at hand.

Now, I suppose you could call this little exploration of mine a quest. In fact, it's been specifically designed so that I have to overcome various challenges of increasing and complex difficulty – which is in part the definition of 'quest'. A quest, a journey through time itself.

Heh, sounds impressive, doesn't it? *A journey through time itself...* Meaningless drivel, really. We're all of us journeying through time; some of us just do it in both directions.

The only light in this underground chamber came from the artificial night sky overhead, in the mist and the starlight. In that dim light, across the length of the cave and the smooth, icy ground, a set of stone steps rose to a single pedestal. A particularly strong shaft of

silver light shone down in a singular beam upon this pedestal, pretty much showing me where I needed to go.

It was only about a hundred metres away, in the centre of the cavern. A clue to the Lost City called to me like the blowing of a horn at sunrise.

I braced myself before taking a step forward, however – the pedestal and what it held was what I had come for, yet there was a challenge to be passed, and it was a brutal one...

If I could have Apparated across the cavern I would have, but ancient magic swirled overhead – magic of Atlantis, of the Before Folk, the Old Ones, the Fae – forbidding such tricks as Apparation.

“Just get it over with, Potter,” I whispered, glancing up at the roiling fog coating the ceiling. The specks of starlight blinked down at me, malevolent and cold, malicious and unforgiving.

Still, I hesitated. This was the *Hall of Illusion*, after all.

“You’re Harry fucking Potter,” I said, clenching my hand around the handle of my briefcase. “And you’ve been through this before.”

“The only way back is forward,” my travelling alter-ego said. According to my fraudulent passport, his name was Ethan Rafe. “Do you wonder if Fleur’s thinking about you right now? Or Nymphadora? Mmm... ménage a trios, Harry?”

“Dirty bastard.”

“Pot. Kettle. Black. No sense delaying the inevitable.”

I took that first step forward and the starlit mist descended like a cloak of the deepest, darkest midnight, drenching me in my worst memories and the ghosts of my past, present, and future.

The fog fell before my eyes, dimming all light and concealing the nearby pedestal from view. It might as well have been a thousand miles away, for all the good it was to me now. I was surrounded by

nothing but black night, and the small pinpricks of light that belonged to magic long since passed from the world.

The first *illusion* – I *had to* remember it wasn't real – to appear before me, to solidify within the mist, drawn straight from my own traitorous mind, was that of my father.

"Hello, Harry," James Potter said, smiling kindly...

Or at least, what would've been kindly, if the flesh on his face hadn't been hollow and pasty, and torn in a dozen small cuts. One of my father's eyes was burst in its socket, a trail of grey jelly leaking down his cheek and onto his bloodied white shirt. His unruly black hair hung matted with blood, flat against his head. There were half a dozen festering burns and oozing gashes criss-crossing his body. He looked as he did when he died – like he'd just gone ten rounds with a certain Dark Lord...

"Hi, dad," I said, letting out a long slow breath and hating my hands for shaking. You'd think I'd be use to this sort of mindfuck by now, after seeing civilisation fall apart... "I'm back again."

"You've stumbled upon the road to lost treasures, and the challenges that await you will not be kind."

"Yeah, I know—"

"You may turn aside thrice and once only, yet the only way back is forward."

It was like a recorded message, I suppose, using one of the harshest memories the starlight magic in the fog could pull from my mind. No doubt it was cruel, yet to safeguard Atlantis from the unworthy, the architect of the map had put a lot of effort into making it hard.

And once upon a time, a lifetime ago, Voldemort had tortured me with his memory of the night I'd nearly destroyed him, in Godric's Hollow. For months on end he had abused the link that connected us, sending me visions of my parents' murder. This was really what my father had looked like when he died.

Yeah... Voldemort's a wanker. One for the ages.

"Let's hurry this up, dad," I said. "There's never enough time – we know that better than most, don't we?"

"Walk with me," James Potter said, dying and dead. He turned and stepped through the mist and I dutifully followed, gritting my teeth and bearing it.

He's just an illusion, I thought, and on the heels of that, This is how he died for you...

"You fail to understand what it is you truly seek, Harry."

"We've been through all this before," I replied, waving my burnt hand through the mist and grasping one of the dots of starlight. It was cold... and slipped right through my closed fist. "You're about to tell me that Time encompasses Space, and Atlantis is hidden in time... I already know, old man."

The illusion of my father frowned, and a particularly vicious gout of blood gushed from his ruined eye socket. "Atlantis is Time encompassed in Space," he said, and I waved him along. "To seek that which is hidden you must journey through the regret of Atlantia... and the bane of our world. Will you turn aside?"

"No."

James Potter laughed. "That counts for one, Harry."

The mist swirled and my father disintegrated before my eyes. My jacket billowed around me as the starlight spun faster and faster, revolving into another familiar figure... the next harsh illusion to guide me on my way.

"Harry Potter – The Boy... Who Lived."

"Hey, Voldemort, you're looking..." I stumbled for the right word, spinning my hand around as if attempting to snatch it out of the air. "Splendid?"

Lord Voldemort, the bane of *my* world, stood before me tall and imposing against the darkness of the fog. The starlight seemed to fail about his form, dim and lifeless. His narrow snake-like face festered with brutal, brilliant intelligence and a cold, hungry thirst for my blood.

“Your mind is a terrifying place, Harry Potter. It holds many horrors... myself almost least of all.”

“And yet you’re in and out of it all the time,” I said. “Come on then – gimme the chance to turn aside from this foolish quest that will undoubtedly rob me of my sanity and my life.”

“The journey to Atlantis will lead to the wealth and knowledge of the Seven Lands, yet you risk your mind and your life for our folly. Regret will seal your fate.”

“Bothersome, that.”

“Will you turn aside?”

“No.” *Never in life.*

Voldemort’s crimson eyes burned with the fury of my continued existence. “That counts for two, Harry.”

Come quickly, listen close – I’m going to share one of life’s great secrets. Yes, yes, a secret. And like most dark, hidden things in this world, it is a secret with teeth. It is something we all learn, that we let children discover for themselves, and that haunts us to our grave... and for all I know, beyond.

It is something we work to forget, something that can be forgotten, if we fill our days with enough activity that we’re left no time to be alone with our thoughts...

You don’t have to hear this, just block your ears and turn away... last chance... Are you sure? Very well:

Regrets are forever.

How many regrets do you have?

One? Two? A few?

Enough to fill a lifetime?

Regrets are forever.

Wounds heal, bones mend, regrets are forever – regrets don't heal, they whisper and dig deep into our souls.

The starlit fog churned around me, spinning like a whirlpool faster and faster and sweeping up the edge of my torn suit jacket. The illusion stolen from my head of Voldemort faded, only to be replaced by a third and more horrifying figure...

"My sweet 'Arry, what 'as become of you now?"

Precious Fleur Delacour... ah hell... Sometimes it's Tonks I see at this stage. The nightmares in my head of a time that has not come to pass (yet) were perfect fodder for this dark magic of *illusion*.

"You're not real," I said, betrayed only by the shake in my voice. It was real enough. Real enough that I could smell the burnt flesh that covered most of Fleur's beautiful body.

Fleur stood before me in ragged blue robes, dirtied and bloodied, that barely clung to her frail form. Her gorgeous blond hair had been scorched from her skull, and her silky smooth skin was rough and abrasive, bruised and swollen. One of her eyes bulged, threatening to burst, and half the teeth in her gums had been blasted out of her mouth by the heat that had claimed her life.

Once upon a time, this horror had been *real*.

Fleur had died in my arms as I held her in the smouldering pit of fire that Voldemort had made of those who had dared to stand against him – my friends, my allies, my lover. I held her and burned alive.

Three guesses what caused the greater pain, but you'll only need one...

"My, my, 'Arry, you are blushing!"

My face was red – red with raw anger. Anger at Voldemort, at myself, at the future-memories, at this *fucking* mind-fog. "Speak your piece and ask me to turn aside," I snarled.

"You are angry?"

"I care for you... and this is what happens. I destroy your life." I paused. *This isn't real. You don't have to justify yourself to an illusion... it's only responding to your emotion.* "And yet, I keep coming back... don't ask me why. I'm young and selfish."

The magic in this hall of illusions didn't know how to respond to that, so it continued its spiel to get me to turn aside. I suppose this was like one of those tests that judged me pure of heart or some such shit.

"There is naught but regret in the heart of Atlantis, traveller, and the folly of greed and arrogance. Regret is forever."

Now *that* was a truth I'd learned before. "I know, I know, sweet Fleur, yet Voldemort is already well on his way there, whether he knows it or not, thanks to a loophole in the whole 'pure' soul thing, so I have to go again..."

"'Arry Potter, will you turn aside?"

"No."

Fleur smiled. It was terrible. "That counts for three – once more for all."

I sighed as she disintegrated into so much ash and dust in the mist. "Alright, bring him on..."

The mist swirled about me a final time, howling in my ears and running me through with cold sparks of starlight. It had shown me

nightmares of my past, my present, and mayhap all wrapped up in a glimpse of the future – what could be left?

A pale figure emerged from the dark fog, whole and unharmed, eyes burning with small sparks of red light and an enigmatic grin plastered all over his handsome face.

“Hey, Harry,” I said, looking at my reflection that wasn’t quite... right. His suit was immaculate, his unruly black hair stylish.

“Hello,” Harry replied. He was calm and unflappable – yet his eyes were cold.

“You about to tell me that hate leads to the Dark side?”

“Atlantis is a fool’s quest,” Harry said to me, and his tone was sad – he knew what I was going to do, what I had done – yet those cold eyes danced with barely suppressed mirth.

“Why the cool special effects to dissuade me?” I said, addressing the sparkling mist as a whole and not just my near-mirror image. “You want me to reclaim the Lost City and tear it from the clutches of the Dark Lord before he unwittingly unleashes Hell’s armies. Trust me, I know. No turning aside now.”

Harry tilted his head and gazed at me without blinking. It was more than a little unnerving, but hell, what wasn’t in my life? Those small pinpricks of crimson light burning deep within my counterpart’s eyes only added to the discomfort. I wasn’t as far gone as *that*.

“You will be,” Harry said to me. “You know it, you’ve felt it before. The lust for power – you could own the world yourself, if not for the Dark Lord. It is a stain on your mind and your soul.”

“Get out of my head,” I said, and quite reasonably I thought.

“Turn aside, Harry,” the illusion said, near-begging me – yet his damned eyes still laughed through the frost. He wasn’t asking me, he was telling me. “Turn aside.”

“And then what?” I asked, almost genuinely curious. There was no turning aside, no going back, not even into death. Not now not ever.

Harry shrugged, avoiding my eyes. “This doesn’t have to be your world. Time was you—”

“Time, time, time... don’t speak to me of time. Hurry it along, I have places to be.”

“Very well. On your head be it.” He began to laugh much like the mimicry of James Potter had. “Will you turn aside?”

“And forsake all the fame and fortune? I think not. No.”

Harry smiled, baring his teeth. “Four times and be damned to you, Harry Potter.”

“And you, you handsome devil.” Was I making the same old mistakes in new and exciting ways yet again? Maybe yes, maybe no...

The starlight-fog began to vanish as if it were smoke in the wind, taking the darker reflection of myself with it. The silver sparks of light faded to nothing and the cool icy cavern came back into focus, although the only source of light was dwindling fast.

“*Lumos*,” I whispered, holding my wand before me in my sore hand. A thick beam of light shot out of the tip and hit the ceiling, highlighting in impressive turquoise-blue the sheets of wavy ice that covered the rocky cave.

The starlit fog disappeared entirely, diminished to nothing, as if it never was. I found myself at the foot of the old stone steps that led up to the pedestal I’d noticed upon my arrival to this house of smoke and mirrors.

Not wanting to dilly-dally (yeah, I said dilly-dally) I hopped up the steps, which the ice did not touch, although it would claim the pedestal entirely now that the magical fog had been exhausted, its millennia-old task of trying to dissuade a weary traveller from the path to Atlantis spent.

At the top of the steps was a shaft of flat stone that held a chest similar to the one I'd discovered deep, deep below the *Magnus Fontis*, a chest that had held the Time-Turner around my neck and the portkey that had brought me to this cavern of ice and fog. I stepped out onto the raised pillar, my head nearly brushing the ceiling, and knelt before the chest.

The wood was cool and near-petrified, and the lid splintered and crumbled in my hands as I removed it and beheld the treasure within. For well over three thousand years this chest had been hidden from the world, hiding secrets of a time remembered only as myth. No matter how many times I did it, and this was definitely not the first, I felt apprehensive and a little nervous as I became part of a game that had already destroyed the world once before.

"A long, long time ago," I whispered, and bit my tongue.

My hands shook, and not just from the cold, as I removed a leather-bound manuscript from the base of the archaic chest.

It was all that was in the chest, and yet it was quite possibly half of one of the most important books ever written. I held it carefully flat on my hand, a sheaf of parchments about an inch thick and bound in thin leather, sealed with that ancient symbol of eternity – the mark of Atlantis. Unlike the chest, this book had the strongest preservation charms in the world fused into its being – I don't doubt that it could sit in a pool of burning dragon's fire for hours and come out unscathed. Still, I handled it carefully. It was half of something very precious.

When I say *half* of one book, I mean to say that this document, that someone had gone to all the trouble of burying under thousands and thousands upon thousands of tonnes of mountain in Nepal, was the cipher-key to a second manuscript that had been discovered some six hundred years ago, and was currently gathering dust in the United States of America – which was on my list of worldwide stops.

I opened my magically-expanded briefcase and made some room, folding up the Invisibility Cloak properly and stacking all the fraudulent documents and various pieces of new clothing (that had survived the waterfall-incident in Tivoli) I'd bought with Fleur in Carcassonne to one side, and the bundles of Muggle bank notes in the middle.

There, that made enough room.

I placed my newly acquired leather-bound key to the *Voynich Manuscript*, to the wondrous world that had swallowed Atlantis whole, in the small gap left and grappled with the clasp for a moment to force the damned thing shut.

I need some living space, I thought. The briefcase was fit-to-burst. I couldn't spend the next few days living out of it. *But where could I go that wouldn't be expected?*

I hadn't forgotten about Tweedledum and Tweedledee – the unexplained demons that had succeeded in killing me (and Fleur) in Diagon Alley, and tried again just yesterday evening in Tivoli. Heh, it felt like weeks ago. It had been a long day in Rome today... They had known where to find me twice, as had the woman Dumbledore called a goddess, Saturnia.

A large part of me wanted to head straight back to France and to Fleur's family home in the countryside. An equally large part felt a strong pull back to England and the Order of the Phoenix, to one particular metamorphing guardian in particular. But I had a feeling both of these options wouldn't remain hidden and safe for long, especially for the ladies.

If Tweedledum and Tweedledee knew as much as I had to assume they did, then they'd find me if I settled down for too long in one place...

And if they don't find you...? A gentle voice in my head teased the reluctant thought out of me. *If they don't find me they might call on Fleur or Tonks anyway, or even Ron and Hermione, the Burrow, to see if you've gone to ground...*

Fuck but it was cold and dark in this empty cavern.

I couldn't ignore the hollow truth in my thoughts.

I glanced at my watch, accounting for the hour I'd travelled back in time with the Time-Turner in the *Magnus Fontis*, it was late afternoon

now. 16:33 and fifty-five seconds. I was hungry and in need of a shower.

What to do? *What to do?*

If I went somewhere unexpected from here, it would put most of my close friends at risk. Was the risk acceptable, given the ferocity of these sword-wielding demons? No, no it wasn't – not even close. They'd stab first and ask questions later. The consequence, and the likelihood, was far too high. I didn't want to think it may have already been too late.

No, fuck it – I had to stick to plan as I'd played it out so many times before. I'd beaten these asshole demons once already, whatever the hell they were. If they came knocking again I'd mess them up just as bad.

It was a good decision, and made me the most likely target. Good then. I was hoping to feel a surge of courage and heroism and that kind of crap, but I just felt cold... cold and a little lonely. Heh, that was odd – was I lonely?

I looked around the icy cavern a final time. It was completely dark save for the small circle of light from my wand that covered most of the pedestal. I was on an island surrounded by cold nothingness. I could've been anywhere – anywhere, any*when*, or any world.

"Maybe yes," I whispered. "Maybe no..."

Ah hell.

With the starlit fog gone the anti-Apparation magic had faded as well, and I took a deep breath before disappearing without a sound, briefcase and all. I was heading somewhere familiar, somewhere with good club sandwiches, good cigars, and beer on tap.

Somewhere I was likely to be expected.

I Apparated illegally across international borders, using my little trick to avoid the security wards and check-in terminals in the half a dozen or so countries between me and my destination. Didn't want the

goblins tracking me down so soon... or any other authority for that matter. Roughly eleven hours ago I'd left this part of the world, the hotel I'd stayed in last night, and Apparated to Rome to meet Dumbledore and gain entry to the Great Library.

Now I was back.

Early twilight had descended over the Italian Peninsula, as I appeared without a sound in the warm gardens of the *Latium* hotel in Tivoli, out of sight and under the rustling branches of a heavy oak tree.

I looked and felt a little worse for the wear – my fine suit torn and dirty from wrestling with a monster of shadow and bone – and was looking forward to beer and meat, maybe a curry, and some heavy cigars. It had been a long, *long* day.

The fat sun sinking towards the horizon was warm and inviting, and I stood for a moment in the light shaking the cold and the dark out of my mind and body. It was good to be out in the open air after spending the last handful of hours deep underground in Rome and Nepal.

The *Latium* was busy this evening as I stepped briskly through the gardens, already planning on getting a good night's sleep. Tomorrow was Thursday, after all, and Fleur had invited me back to her house for afternoon tea. What kind of time-travelling gentleman would I be to turn her down?

Cars were pulling up in the driveway and people, rich tourists, were getting out and taking advantage of the valet service as I limped across the drive and headed toward the main glass doors of the pricy hotel, my briefcase clutched firmly in my right hand. I kept an eye out for any trouble, and my wand poking out of my pocket, just waiting to be drawn.

I reached the door at the same moment as a stunningly beautiful brunette in a tight-fitting red dress and black nylon stockings, complete with a pair of high heels. The doorman was busy arguing with one of the clerks about a trolley full of baggage so I stepped ahead of the young lady in red and held the door for her.

“After you,” I said, with a smile full of charm.

“Mmm... thank you.” She returned my smile, then took a look at my tarnished suit, and thought better of it. I guess that’s what you get for trying to save the world. Maybe if I showed her my wand...

I had looked out of place last night when I’d entered the lobby of the *Latium* soaking wet from my fight with Tweedledum and Tweedledee above the Falls of Tivoli, and I looked out of place again as I entered the hotel a second time, dirtied and a little bloodied, looking like I’d been mugged or worse.

The clerk on duty behind the desk was the same man who had sold me his watch that morning. He’d gotten a good deal at five hundred dollars, American, as well. Needless to say he recognised me, his eyes widening as he took in my dishevelled appearance.

“Mr. Rafe!” he exclaimed. “We did not expect to see you back. Are you well?”

“Got into a bit of a fight, I’m afraid,” I said, brushing at the dirty cuffs of my jacket. “But you should see the other guy – nothing left but a pile of broken bones.”

“Sh-shall I call for a tailor?”

I laughed. “No thanks... Robert.” His name tag reflected the high electric lights overhead. “Just after a room for the next few days, something looking out at the waterfalls, if at all possible.” It wouldn’t do to keep coming and going out of necessity, I could rent the room for a week or two, just in case.

“Of course, sir.”

“Good man. Thanks again for the watch – knowing the time is important to me.”

“Ah, you paid me far too much—”

“Nonsense – I’ve paid a helluva lot more for Time, believe-you-me.” He handed me an electronic swipe card for Room 234. “Stay out of trouble, Rob.”

Heh, if only I could’ve talked circles around the woman in the red dress. Something about her had been very appealing. I sighed, heading over to the lifts... Oh, to be young again. T’was a long lonely night ahead, but maybe that was for the best. She had killer legs though.

Up in my room I shrugged off my jacket and ordered some room service. Half a cow grilled well-done, smothered with mushroom gravy, as well as a six-pack of beer and two clipped cigars. I stood marvelling at the wonder that was room service for a minute, caught up in memories of the past, of the possible future, where food was so scarce that I’d eaten fucking wild dog.

Good times.

Then I remembered that I was fifteen-nearly-sixteen, and here to make sure that the future Fate had planned could go screw itself. *Things were going to be different this time...* I could feel it.

Before anything else I stripped down bare-arse and jumped in the shower. After the cold day underground I’d just had I turned the water on near-blisteringly hot. Heh, with food and beer on the way, this could almost be called living. I washed the day’s grime away, being careful around the crescent of silvery scar-flesh over my heart from a wound that had followed my soul through time itself. It was still tender, raw, and a little itchy. Those demon-bastards were something new, that much was certain.

Dinner was a quiet affair. I ate my steak and drank my beer at the fine oak desk beneath the room’s large double-window, looking out and up into the majestic Falls of Tivoli as true twilight claimed the sky, the sun setting orange and heavy to the west. I wore only a large fluffy white bath towel, save for the Time-Turner around my neck and the Ring of Concealment, being short on clothing that wasn’t torn and filthy.

I had planned to look at the manuscript I'd removed from the heart of Mt. Everest, planned to go over it and refresh my fuzzy memory, yet the fatigue of the day hung leaden like the weight of the whole world upon my shoulders. The cigar smoke made me drowsy.

I fell asleep a little before seven, sprawled upon the large bed, with one hand resting over my silver, time-travelling demonic scar almost protectively.

Oh they whisper... whisper to us late at night, when we're alone. Some of you will be world-weary enough to understand, probably with a stab of raw pain, what I'm saying. The rest of you are probably still too young and wide-eyed to know the sting of regret. I don't envy you the future, though a word of advice...

Take the risk. Try, try, try. Ask that pretty girl out, while you can, laugh alone in a crowd, tell a joke, speak in front of hundreds of people, try to walk on water, to touch the moon – and to fight, if you have to, always and forever that..

The moral of the story? Never back down, never let them see you cry. Trying, whether you succeed or fail, is the only way we can live with ourselves through the regrets that can't be avoided.

And there you have it – try not to think too hard on regret, because it brings nothing but unhappiness. Heh, do you wish you had turned away and blocked your ears? Have I left you with Regret? I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.

It'll fade to the back of your mind, don't worry about that. Go outside, read a book, walk the dog – forget.

T'is for the best.

At the end of the day we all have an Atlantis of our own to find – we just go about it in different ways, yet all of those Ways share the same twilit sky.

BOOM!

FUCK!

They burst in through the double-window sometime after midnight, with the constellations of the early hours twinkling in the background behind them above the twin-waterfalls of Tivoli.

The concussive blast from whatever magic these creatures commanded shattered the window in an impressive display of electric-blue lightning and orange fire, and sent me hurtling arse-over-head across the bed and onto the floor, a rain of sharp glass and splintered wood pouring down upon me.

Needless to say, I was startled awake and on my feet half a heartbeat later, lunging for my wand on the bedside table as the bath towel fell from my waist and I faced both my attackers with flickers of reflected flame in my eyes, as naked as the day I was born.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee, or at least two look-alikes, stood on the desk where I'd enjoyed my dinner, flames licking at the oak and already burning across the walls and carpet.

"Well hello, boys," I snarled, gripping my wand hard. They hadn't even bothered with a human façade this time...

Both demons folded identical pairs of near-transparent, rotten wings into the thick hide on their backs. The grey and veiny skin around their mouths was pulled taut across two rows of sharp fangs, dripping viscous yellow pus that stank to high-heaven from all the way across the room.

"Your betrayal ends tonight, Harry Potter," Tweedledum said, its voice worse than nails on a chalkboard, running down my spine like the cold, clammy fingers of a corpse.

I scoffed – I'd wiped the floor with these demonic dipshits night before last. "You know, I was having a really nice dream about a certain *flexible* metamorphmagus, and you just done gone and ruined that. A lesser man would be burning you to *fucking ash* right now!"

"IT WILL NO LONGER STAND!" Tweedledee roared, its grip tightening around the familiar sword it carried. Hilt wrapped in leather, the blade sharp, dark, and cruelly curved, and imbued with unknown magical strengths. I'd burnt a layer of flesh of my hand the other day, touching a sword like that.

"Calm down," I said reasonably, keeping my wand trained between the two creatures and a blasting curse on the tip of my tongue. Smoke was beginning to gather in the air as the flames from their abrupt arrival began to take a good hold. "What are you? Who sent you?"

The two pairs of eyes, lifeless black orbs, stared at me with what could have been mirth, if the matching grins stretching their jaws even wider were any indication, and small spirals of silver light began to glow within those same orbs.

"We were sent by one who has taken you seriously, Harry Potter."

I took a few slow steps to the left, away from the corner of the room, towards my briefcase resting before the foot of the bed. Both demons tensed as if they were about to strike as I moved. I kicked the briefcase, full of my worldly belongings and the precious manuscript, back towards the door, never taking my eyes from the intruders.

"Give me a name so I know who to track down and gut like a fish!"

"We were sent by He who has judged you accountable, Time-Warrior."

I sighed. "You know what? I don't even care—*AMOS CRI!*" I brandished my wand like a whip and sent a barrage of sharp arrows...

A stream of faint blue sparks spewed out of the tip of my wand, about as dangerous as a day-old kitten, disappearing to nothing before they hit the floor. *What the hell?*

Tweedledum and Tweedledee simply looked at me, both of them making a funny noise in the backs of their throats like a rake dragged across gravel – they were bloody laughing!

“We do not underestimate you again, Harry Potter.”

“*REDUCTO!*” I cried, going for something simple but effective, hoping to blast that burning desk right out from under the laughing sons of bitches.

All the fury my wand unleashed amounted to less than the most pathetic Muggle firework. A dozen red sparks that didn’t even disturb the air. Oh shit, I was in trouble.

“Your power is *severed*,” Tweedledee gloated, pointing its sword straight at my heart and eliciting a fierce jolt of pain from the silvery scar crossing over it. “Mortal *magic* is easily disposed of in our pres—”

The smoke finally triggered the fire alarms and the sprinklers overhead burst to life in a rain of cold water accompanied by a whining siren as ear-piercing as a high, screeching whistle.

I saw my chance and took it. I turned and ran at the door, diving down to pick up my briefcase as I grasped the handle and *hurled* myself into the hallway, dripping wet from the sprinkler system and still extremely naked.

Anticipating the worst I stayed low, and it saved my life as from within the room shrieks that drowned out even the fire alarm rose in untamed fury, and the same bolts of blue-fire that had torn my window from its frame *punched* through the wall in a spray of plaster and wood, striking with the ferocity of a lightning storm.

Heh, Tweedledum and Tweedledee were going for the kill – sending bolts of raw energy pounding through the wall, settling alight the hallway and blowing various pieces of furniture, flower vases, and hanging paintings to bits. The corridor outside my room quickly became a death-trap.

I scuttled across the carpeted floor on my elbows and knees, wand in one hand briefcase in the other. A steady rain from the sprinklers chilled my bare skin as bolt after bolt of sizzling electric death threatened to run me through. Amazingly, miraculously, I avoided

dying by sheer luck alone, and rose shakily to my feet, having cleared the edge of my room.

What's the plan, Harry? I thought quickly, running through my options. *Somehow, impossibly, these arseholes are blocking my magic.* Um... *Plan B! Fucking run!*

I took a second to concentrate and then Apparated—

SWEET MERLIN, DAMN IT ALL TO HELL!

Nothing happened. Apparation was as blocked as my spellwork. I might as well have been a Muggle, for all the good magic was to me at the moment. I tried to Apparate again, to the same result, and then turned and ran through the rain of fire sprinklers that were attempting to subdue the rising orange-blue flames.

Other hotel guests were emerging from their rooms, blurry eyes heavy with sleep opened up wide as I ran past naked. I was about halfway down the corridor towards the elevators when the door and wall to my room (complete with a full mini-bar I hadn't even touched) simply exploded in a deadly barrage of flying plaster and wood, and two creatures that belonged to Hell itself appeared from within the dust and the flames, wailing for my head.

Still running, I aimed a shot over my shoulder and fired a bone-shattering hex that rolled off my tongue as if I'd known it my whole life. Damn future-memories. It was a poor choice, as I didn't even know if these bastard demons had *bones*, yet I needn't have bothered, as the magic fizzled and died before it even left my wand.

In all my years, after all I'd seen, this was something *new*. Five minutes ago I would have said it was impossible, cutting off my magic without taking away my wand. Yet here I was, defenceless and running bare-arse for my life.

Defenceless, maybe, a small voice whispered in my mind, in beat with the unceasing headache, *but powerless, Harry? Not you. Never in life. All that's happened is they've taken your wand away – work from there.*

I reached the end of the hallway and slammed my fist into the call button for the elevator, the thin chain of the Time-Turner around my neck bouncing back and forth.

It took a second for that to click over in my mind. *The Time-Turner!*

I didn't hesitate, flicking the tiny sparkling hourglass back an hour, confident and sure that—

Sweet fuck all happened. *How could they DO this?*

The only way I was travelling through time was if I died, and started this whole messed up adventure all over again. Yet I no longer knew what the consequences of that would be – would it kill me? It hurt more every time, my eyes *bled*, could I manage it again? No, I had to assume this was my last chance...

And I didn't want to have to remember dying again.

I ducked as the demons raised their swords towards me and blue fire curled around the dark blades before erupting in half a dozen streaks of vicious, crackling blue power, tearing apart the hallway to reach me at its far end. The wide-eyed hotel guests were either screaming or stood stock-still in shock. The explosions and lances of hot fire that rent the air between me and the demons had them diving back into their rooms, heading for cover, ignoring the fire alarm and the need to evacuate.

The elevator doors behind me *binged* open as the wild torrents of electric-flame *screamed* down the hall, and I jumped back between the opening-doors, scanning for the button panel before they opened fully and jammed the tip of my wand against the button with the two inward-facing arrows, closing the doors again.

I was a fraction too slow, and two well-aimed bolts of power struck between the narrow gap in the doors, exploding against the back of the lift and blasting a hole through into the darkness of the shaft beyond. If I'd still been standing they would've taken me through the neck and heart.

The button for the ground floor was already aglow as the lift jerked into motion downwards, and the heavy sound of things exploding back on the burning floor I'd just abandoned became muffled and ominous.

I stood up, took a deep breath, and noticed that I wasn't alone in the lift. I let my deep breath out slowly, staring at the beautiful lady in the red dress that I'd held the door for outside the hotel only a few hours ago. The woman stared at me, at the smouldering holes in the back of the lift, and then back at me, down at my...

I was dripping wet, shivering, bleeding from half a dozen small cuts that I could see, and there was a crack in the left lens of my glasses. Through my left eye the world looked slightly fractured.

"Um... it's cold out," I said, feeling the need to defend 'little Harry' in my state of undress. Sounds of wrenching metal echoed up above in the elevator shaft.

Spots of colour appeared high in the woman's cheeks. She clutched her designer handbag and looked as if she were ready to club me to death with it if I so much as moved.

"Well, is this awkward, or what?" I strategically held my briefcase in front of myself, trying to save as much embarrassment as I could. Was that *Hey Jude* playing over the speakers in the elevator, more than a little drowned out by the fire alarm? Something important was nagging at me, something out of place... "My name's Harry... and I'm just trying to save the world..."

The lady in red was saved from answering the naked lunatic opposite her as it was at that moment that the entire elevator *lurched* to the right, slamming us both against the wall as the heavy whip-crack of taut cable snapping and unravelling lashed above our heads.

"Aw, hell..." I whispered, a moment before the elevator cable gave way and the box I was in began to plummet down the empty shaft towards the ground floor.

The fall was short and ended quite abruptly, as the woman next to me screamed loud enough to wake the dead. We fell for maybe three

storeys, jostled around like a Quaffle, bouncing off the walls and hitting the base of the shaft hard enough to jar my shoulder numb.

Fucking time-demons.

The doors to the ground floor *binged* open, and I extracted myself from *around* the lady in red, who was still screaming hysterically, and crawled out of the lift as half a tonne of steel cable crashed down upon it. The woman scampered out after me, shaken and out of sorts, tears running down her face. Just another innocent bystander scarred for life.

“STILL ALIVE DOWN HERE!” I shouted back up the shaft and at the ceiling, incensed and *furious*. I strode forward, taking a chance and working on a theory, brandishing my wand before me and up at the cracked roof of the lift. “*INCENDIOS GRATA!*”

A thick column of flame as hot as the *fucking sun* burst from the tip of my wand and expanded, punching through the roof of the lift and *burning*, burning through cable and air and igniting the shaft with all the fires of hell.

Heh, so those bastard things *did* have to be fairly close to cut me off from my magic. I kept my wand burning, kept the elevator shaft alive with an inferno of flame hot enough to melt metal. Drips and drabs of the steel cable fell through the fires and pooled in the bottom of the ruined lift.

All the while and through the anger, my mind was racing. *How had they found me? Sure, I'd gone someplace arguably visible and expected, but this was quick work.* I was either being followed, somehow, from Rome to Nepal and back again, or there was some other means, magical means, being employed to track me.

Two curved blades with hilts aflame fell through the base of my fire, as my wand grew painfully hot in my hand. They clanged against the pool of solidifying metal at my feet, stuck fast, and the acrid aroma of burnt flesh, poisoned flesh, seared my nostrils and made me gag.

Fuck yes, I'd burnt the bastard demons to ash as they'd tried to follow me down the elevator shaft. They were no match for me at all when I had my magic locked and loaded, ready to do some *real* damage.

I cut off the fire spell and let my arm fall to my side. My shoulder was aching something fierce from the impact in the lift. At least I'd held onto my briefcase – losing that, losing the manuscript... well, the only other way to Atlantis required something I was unable to give, but that Voldemort had relinquished time and time again...

"Harry two, time-demons one," I snarled, turning away from the burning shaft and toward the hotel lobby.

The lady in red's small dagger took me just beneath my ribs on the left side of my chest. I felt the cool metal ricocheting off my lower ribcage, and digging a deep furrow about two inches across.

I gasped in surprise, in confusion, in sheer *fucking* pain.

My blood, hot and sticky, flowed down the elegant knife in her perfectly manicured hand and across her fingernails. A steady trickle ran in rivulets over her soft skin and down her arm, as I stood motionless and caught, bent to the side on reflex alone, trying to edge the knife out of my flesh. I managed to keep hold of my wand, but the briefcase fell to the floor at my feet.

"Hush, hush, sweet Harry," the lady in red said, her mouth smiling and her blue eyes truly compassionate. She no longer looked like an innocent bystander, and I was a fool to have been so easily taken in. "It's okay, it's okay..."

She leaned in close. I caught the light scent of her fragrance, the smell of her long golden-brown hair. Her lips, naturally full and red, pressed against mine, which had drained of all colour, in a warm, moist embrace that only served to dig the dagger half an inch deeper. I moaned, yet cold surprise hit me harder than the pain of the knife.

Breaking the kiss, the lady in red slipped the knife out of me and my legs buckled, failed of all strength, and I fell back onto the smooth velvet carpet set upon the marble lobby of the hotel. I lifted my head, glanced down at my left side. Everything was far too crimson.

This is... what the fu—?

I sucked in a harsh breath, which forced a gout of fresh blood gushing from the wound in my side, and looked up at the stunning brunette who had just stabbed me and kissed me in the same breath.

“Are you chasing a girl or a dream tonight, Harry?”

Oh. Now that was familiar...

Four or so pieces of the puzzle fell into place. “Saturnia,” I growled, taking short, quick breaths. “Unrivalled beauty, my arse, Dumbledore...”

The old woman I’d met in the fish markets of Rome early yesterday, the old *blind* woman who had appeared only to me, and who had been playing *Hey Jude* from a broken radio. An old woman who had known where I was going to be, who had mocked me with hints of time, and old woman who was not so old anymore. *Hey Jude* had been playing in the goddamn lift...

“You’re a smart boy,” Saturnia said, smiling, licking her lips. “And you taste older than you look.”

“Please tell me you’re not a demon under that cheap hooker’s dress,” I replied, trying to keep my tone even through the railroad spike of pain that had been driven into my side.

Saturnia *giggled*. “I am a woman, Harry Potter.” She moved around my head to my other side, her high-heeled shoes clicking on the carpet, towards my briefcase. I followed her with my eyes, every curve. “A woman of considerable power beyond your, forgive me, *meagre* comprehension.”

The lobby wasn’t abandoned, there were people bursting out of the main entrance and the fire escape doors, a steady stream of guests had taken the stairs since the lift was out of order, yet no one seemed inclined to come to my aid – no one even really looked at me, or at the lady in red above me. Their eyes were drawn to the smouldering remains of the elevator, but not to what lay before it. Some power, some magic this woman held, hid us from sight as I bled to death.

"You stabbed me."

"Yes. I needed your blood." She held up the small knife that had pierced my side, smiling all the while, and slipped it into her black purse.

"It was a mistake."

"Is that a threat, Harry?"

I laughed and turned my head away, looked down at the wound in my side, and laughed some more, even though it hurt like all hell.

Saturnia placed her foot under my chin, gently turning my head back to meet her eyes. "I said, is that a threat, Harry Potter?"

She stroked my cheek with her shoe – I was tempted to bite her. "Yes, ma'am, that was a threat – that was a *fucking* promise."

Saturnia laughed and clapped her hands together, delighted. "Here I have you dead to rights, Harry, naked and smeared with your life's blood, and yet you remain totally defiant. Oh, how wonderful, I told him you were special."

"Told who?" I asked. *Can't be Voldemort...*

She quirked a single perfect eyebrow at me. Her beauty was all too perfect. If she was human then I was Dorothy Gale from Kansas, just looking for a way home. "One who has taken you seriously, Harry."

Now that rang true with what the time-demons had said up in my room. "You sent Tweedledum and Tweedledee to coax me out of my room." She looked perplexed. "Those sword-wielding, stab-happy, pieces of shit I just burned to ash."

"Ah, yes, those creatures have their uses... though I do not command them, Harry. I would not *lower* my standards so far. After all, young men such as yourself are so easily persuaded by *other*, far more enjoyable means."

I thought about that for a moment, about how gorgeous this woman who had stabbed me was, and was inclined to agree. Still... the bitch had stabbed me. "If you're talking about that impressive rack barely concealed beneath your dress, well I have to say I'd rather dance with the demons, lady."

Saturnia *tsked*. "Tut, tut, Harry, just for that, I'm afraid that no magical charms or potions will be able to heal that wound I gave you. No, no... it will have to fix itself the old fashioned way, the more *painful* way. A gentle reminder of me, and our kiss, to keep with you for the next few weeks."

Saturnia knelt down next to me on her knees and brushed her hand over my side, sending a sharper and clearer burst of pain over the hot, sizzling wound.

"You... you're not going to kill me?" I asked through gritted teeth.

"Hmm... no. I was tasked to, you're supposed to die, Harry, don't get me wrong, yet you'll live for now, provided you take care of that wound properly." She smiled, her lips full and inviting as she placed them on my cheek. "Yet you and I both know, do we not, that death means nothing to you, save the turning back of the clock to the day before yesterday. You will die, Harry, that much is certain, but this has only just begun..."

I struggled to sit up, grinning and bearing the shots of pure pain from my side right up through my chest. Saturnia did not try and stop me – indeed, she put a hand under my back and helped me steady myself.

"There we are – such a brave boy." She stroked her fingers through my hair. "A boy any mother could be proud of. So brave, so selfless time and time again..."

I recoiled from her touch as if kicked in the balls. I still clutched my wand in a death-grip and raised it between us, narrowing my eyes and daring her to touch me again.

"Mmm... boys and their toys." Saturnia rose to her feet and stepped back from me. "A pity we can't spend more time together, Harry."

Think of me, will you, as I'll be thinking of you, my brave, lonely, Time-Warrior."

"Why did you need my blood?" I asked, sensing our abrupt meeting was coming to an end.

"Now, Harry, a girl's got to have some secrets."

"Tell me!" I growled, wincing at the fire in my side.

Saturnia ignored me, her eyes fastened to my chest as it rose and fell in short, ragged breaths. More accurately, she was staring as if fascinated by the tiny sparkling hourglass that hung from the chain around my neck. The Time-Turner.

"Such a precious little thing," she whispered, raising her perfect hand, stained red with my blood. The Time-Turner rose as well, attracted like iron to a magnet, the chain straining against my neck, struggling to reach the lady in the red dress... "You mortals and your concept of time – this device is simply astonishing."

And it's mine! "Look a little further down, just below my waist, you'll see something astonishing," I growled.

Saturnia laughed. "Some other time, Harry, should you survive." Her gaze never left the Time-Turner. "An old design, of an age long since faded from the world, yet superbly crafted. With just a few tweaks here and there..." Silver light sparkled between her bloodstained fingers and I felt the Time-Turner grow warm. "Ah, perfect, the river flows both ways."

"W-what?"

"Be safe, Harry, until we meet again – and we will, before the end." Saturnia began to slowly twirl her finger clockwise in the air, as if drawing an invisible circle.

"What did you—?"

The tiny silver hourglass of my Time-Turner mimicked her finger movements and began to move on its swivel... The sands of time began to turn... Only they were turning the *wrong* way.

“Shit,” I said, and reached a bloodied hand out for my briefcase, pulling it in close just as the world dissolved around me, and I travelled through time.

The burning hotel, the dark lobby carpet stained with my blood, and the woman that Dumbledore said was a goddess, all disappeared under a blur of colours and shapes rushing past me below a fierce, howling wind.

It was different than before – different from normal. It was nauseating, and lasted longer than a handful of seconds. Half a minute passed and I was on the verge of throwing up my exquisite steak dinner when the world reasserted itself, and I found myself exactly where I was before.

Only a moment ago I had been sitting naked in a hotel that had been burning down. Now I sat naked in a hotel that had *burnt* down.

The carpet that had been beneath me, soaking up my blood, was less than ash, and the marble beneath that was still warm. The walls were scorched of all colours, the lamps and chandeliers fused lumps of glass and crystal, the air was riddled with ash and the warm, bitter taste of smoke and burnt plastic suffused the hotel lobby.

The Time-Turner had brought me *forward* in time by at least a handful of hours. I glanced over at the main entrance of the hotel, the fire had spread even that far, and through the soot-darkened windows that hung shattered in their frames, I glimpsed strong daylight. At least seven or eight hours had gone by, possibly more.

Holy hell – I eyed the Time-Turner with suspicion, wary of whatever Saturnia might have done.

After a moment I attempted to stand up, yet the knife wound in my side was still fresh and raw, and it was a hell of an effort on my part, but I gained my feet, cringing at the fresh rush of warmth that trickled down my side. The air was so dry, yet my hair was still wet from the

drenching I'd received from the sprinkler system. I felt out of sorts, I felt as if the whole world, reality, had skipped a beat without me – which in a way I suppose it had.

“Oi! *Voi!*” A muffled Italian shout. “*Figlio!*”

I looked up sharply and caught sight of three men, three fire-fighters dressed in heavy fluorescent-yellow jackets and gas masks, hooked up to oxygen tanks over their shoulders. Muggle emergency services. They began to move towards me. One of them had an axe.

It took me about two seconds to decide on a course of action.

Plan A: I could stay and most likely be taken into custody by the Muggle authorities, who would attend to the bleeding wound in my side, and question me about the fire and just what the hell I was doing naked and covered in my own blood inside a hotel that had burned hours ago... That would see my stab wound taken care of by a medical professional, yet I didn't doubt it would leave quite a bit of paperwork about a strange boy with an odd scar on his forehead that would draw the attention of certain people, and goblins, in the magical world.

I couldn't afford that kind of attention, especially from Dumbledore. I was barely surviving as it was... and there was still work to do in this part of the world.

Which left, once again, Plan B: Disappear – Apparate somewhere where I could patch myself up – I knew how, and if Saturnia was to be believed, magic wouldn't heal me anyways... Was there another option? No.

“So be it,” I whispered, and Disapparated in front of three very surprised Muggles, who no doubt thought they'd just seen a ghost.

What lies beyond Death, I wonder?

I've died enough times and yet haven't a clue.

Religions create a world beyond death, philosophers speculate of such a place, whilst the rest of us merely hope.

Who knows?

In this time of prayers and last minute memories, as I stand in the wings full of hope that was the wrong hope... who knows?

It took a supreme amount of will power and effort to Apparate across the Italian border and into France without attracting the sort of attention that would get me killed by goblins – heh, you’re not really living if you can’t say that at least once in life.

And Apparating with a knife-wound that had pierced me up under my ribs was not the most comfortable feeling in the world. In fact it was downright fucking agony, and as soon as I appeared I fell to my knees, a short, brief cry of pain escaping my throat.

“Oh that hurts...”

The sun was bright overhead, and since my watch was so much ash back in Italy, I used it to judge the time at around two, maybe closer to three, in the afternoon.

I was kneeling in spongy grass within a luscious meadow in the south of France, dandelions, heath, lavender and juniper surrounded me. A cool breeze caught the loose dandelion bulbs on the air, fresh and light with the natural scent of summer. The whole scene was warm and inviting.

I undid the clasp on my briefcase and dug around in the contents, being careful now not to exert any unnecessary strain on my side. I’d lost a fair amount a blood – approaching dangerous levels. I needed the wound to start clotting so I could fix it up. From the bottom of the briefcase, below the Invisibility Cloak, I had a pair of jeans and a black shirt – all that had survived from my shopping afternoon with Fleur.

The jeans I pulled on with little effort, although I was without socks or shoes. The shirt, thank Merlin, was button-up so I didn't have to try and pull it over my head. I shrugged my arms into the soft cotton and did up a few of the buttons.

"*Reparo...*" I fixed the crack in my glasses. And there, I was almost presentable, if not for the shirt sticking to the blood on my side and the lack of footwear.

I rose to my feet – a task that was becoming more and more arduous every minute – stifling a grunt of pain, and took in the rest of my surroundings. If I'd gotten the Apparation right, and I had, then the family home of the Delacour's was just beyond the crest of the meadow.

I began to walk, holding my right hand tight against my wound.

There was a commanding view to the south, and I spied the towers of the fortified town of Carcassonne about four or five miles away. I'd bought my fancy suit from there, because Fleur said I'd looked handsome. Below the hill town flowed the Canal du Midi, where Fleur and I had enjoyed a brief lunch after leaving England – only two and a half days ago... heh, busy few days.

I rose over the crest in the meadow and my destination came into view.

I left the fields of flowers and struck upon a country road that would take me all the way to Carcassonne, if I had a mind to follow it. I didn't. I had a mind towards the large manor house, coated in creeping vines, just a stone's throw away.

Fleur's garden path was dusty limestone, and I felt the gentle pull of the wards surrounding the property as I stepped into the garden. Statues and small fountains complete with ornamental bird houses, enclosed in a small, full hedge that kept the massive oak trees on the edge of the land at bay.

What had Fleur said the other day? Oh yeah: "*Perhaps you can drop in for a visit – say Thursday afternoon for tea, 'Arry, if you are not busy saving ze wizarding world.*"

Nope, certainly not saving the world at the moment. Just getting my arse kicked trying.

I approached the large ornate mahogany door and grasped the brass knocker, thumping it up and down three times to announce my arrival. There was no answer. I waited a minute and knocked again... no answer.

Was this cause for concern?

I thought hard, sifting through my jumbled memories. Through the hazy, fuzzy mess of other lives and unrealised futures. It would be weeks, even months, before my mind could sort them all into any workable order. Still... I had memories of being here before, of coming back for tea on Thursday afternoon. Ah, there we go... I smiled.

It would have been a pleasant walk around the old manor house and through the nice gardens, if not for the numbing, fiery pain in my side. I walked along the side of the house and under the hanging eaves of old oak trees, with trunks as thick as the towers of Hogwarts, and quietly opened and closed a heavy cast-iron gate that swung silently on well-oiled hinges.

Fleur's backyard was basically an extension of the vibrant meadowlands that surrounded the whole house for miles around. Thick wavy grass had been cut into a large oval lawn, complete with various statues of men and women, of animals, with a flare for avian creatures. There was a large swimming pool, the water sparkling and blue, and a fountain in the centre propelling streams of foamy spray high into the air. A chair-swing sat on the decking, looking out to the west and what would probably almost always be an excellent sunset.

In the heart of the garden, on that shaved lawn, lying upon a picnic blanket with her back to me, her long blonde hair cascading over her shoulder and a thick book between her hands, was Fleur Delacour.

My heart began to beat a little faster – which wasn't good at all for the gaping wound in my side.

I stepped out from under the eaves of the trees and into the warm sun out on the lawn. My footsteps were near-silent as I was without shoes, and as I grew near I felt my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth, anxious butterflies in my stomach. Where was my charming bravado now? I circled around to her front so as not to frighten her.

“Hello there, Fleur.”

Fleur glanced up from her book, startled. Yet she recovered quickly. “My, my, ‘Arry Potter himself,” she said, a small smile tugging at the corners of her rose-red lips. “He strolls into my garden as if from a fairytale – every young girls dream, no?”

I stopped and admired Fleur in the sun for a moment. She rested gracefully on the chequered picnic blanket, her bare feet and legs shining almost golden-brown to the knee, and the curve of her body only just concealed beneath a floral dress of faded blue roses. And, oh, she was glistening.

Heh, not gonna lie, even slowly bleeding to death I had several impure thoughts. I won’t bore you with the details – but yeah, I mean, who wouldn’t? Am I right, men?

“Well, I like to think so...” I replied.

“You must not be saving ze world today, ‘Arry.”

“I was just thinking that, but I had a... minor setback.”

Fleur had stopped smiling, having noticed the way I was holding myself, my lack of shoes, the tightness around my eyes and the strained, breathlessness of my voice.

“‘Arry?” she said, alarmed.

“If I can just use your bathroom, Fleur,” I said, peeling my shirt off my side and lifting it up for her to see the damage. “I need to take care of something.”

Fleur was on her feet before I finished speaking, the colour draining from her face. All at once she looked cold and cruel – and beautiful. Was that the Veela in her, doing that? I thought it might be.

“*Merde*, ‘Arry, there *iz* much blood! Quickly, to ze house!”

I nodded and began to walk, feeling the strain again in every step. I couldn’t persuade enough air into my lungs without sending a lance of pure pain rushing like a band around my whole chest. I hurt pretty bad, but was putting on a brave face...

“What happened to you?”

“Disagreement with... *something*... in Italy. Got stabbed a bit, is all.”

Fleur winced. She looked ready to try and catch me if I fell. She was so lithe that I reckon we’d both tumble to the ground if she tried. And I really, *really* did not want to have to get back up again.

Fleur let me in through the backdoor into the kitchen. It was cool inside the house, refreshingly so, and the kitchen smelt of freshly baked bread and milk. I felt comforted already for having come here. I followed Fleur past green marble bench tops and racks of saucepans and hanging vegetables, and out into the main hallway that stretched down through the house to the front door.

The downstairs bathroom was large and ornate. The bathtub was huge, the shower cubicle wide and all the taps and fittings were gilded with what was probably solid gold. A large mirror encased in arches of genuine stone took up most of the far wall, above various wooden cabinets. Everything was very clean, very *white*.

“No one else home?” I asked.

“*Non*. My family *iz* at ze Ministry in Paris for ze weekend.”

“Gabrielle, too?”

“*Oui* – now take your shirt off.”

I grinned, a dozen sleazy retorts springing to mind, but I was too gosh darn tired. I undid the buttons and slowly slipped out of my shirt, folding it carefully onto the cabinets below the mirror. It was my only shirt, after all, short of Privet Drive...

"Merde, 'Arry. Merde, merde, merde... that iz awful."

I used the mirror to look at my wound, lifting my left arm as high as I could. The blood had dried across most of my stomach and right around my back, yet fresh rivulets ran down over the waistband of my jeans, which were becoming quite stained as well. The gash itself was about two inches across and curving up towards my heart – the skin above it was red and enflamed.

"Looks pretty bad," I agreed.

"Wait here, I will get ze healing salves and potions."

Fleur darted off before I could say anything, her soft footsteps bounding through the house. The potions were worth a try anyway – I wasn't just going to take Saturnia at her word that magic wouldn't be able to heal me. The only other option would hurt like all hell for days.

I dropped my briefcase and turned on the taps in the sink, hot and cold, and soaked a hand towel which I used to clean most of the blood, dried or not, off my side. I worked slowly and with care – there was still a slow trickle of blood from the wound, but it had lessened considerably. I also took the Time-Turner from around my neck and shoved it deep into my jeans pocket – I didn't know if Fleur had noticed it or not, or would even recognise it if she had, but it was a question better left for another time.

Fleur returned two minutes later at a run, her face still pale yet composed, her wand in hand, and a satchel of clinking potion bottles under one arm.

"I owe you one towel," I said, holding up the once-white hand towel that was now stained a cheery crimson.

"Nonsense, 'Arry," Fleur replied, zipping open the satchel and quickly removing the contents onto the cabinets. "Here, we 'ave skin-knitting

salves and pain-relief potions, numbing powder... *Merde*, I do not know what should come first!"

I placed my hand on top of hers, smiling calmly. "It's okay, I do – but no need to rush, I'm not about to pass out or die or anything so dramatic. Just stings a bit, is all. If I could have the pain-rel—"

Fleur snatched up a vial of purple potion and popped the cork. I took it from her and knocked it back, always prepared for the worst taste, and it was horrible. The potion crawled down my throat like sour honey, yet I felt it get to work on the raw enflamed fire under my arm almost straight away. Did nothing for my constant headache, but then I hadn't expected it to.

"Right then, that's better," I said, letting out a low sigh. "Sorry about all this, Fleur."

"Don't be ridiculous, 'Arry," she replied. "You are hurt – doing something heroically foolish, no doubt."

"I lost that nice new suit we bought."

Fleur found a smile, a little colour returned to her face, lighting her eyes. "You are no longer handsome, I'm afraid."

I sighed heavily and picked up the skin-knitting salve. If Saturnia's knife had punctured anything vital I wouldn't have made it so far, and I kind of believed her when she said I'd live if I took care of it. There was no internal damage – I wouldn't be walking if there was. The salve was yellow and as thick as cream. I dabbed it on carefully, right over the cut, flinching each time I moved.

"Give that a minute then."

Almost immediately the salve started to sizzle and I hissed through my teeth. In the mirror the yellow cream bubbled and burned, and in a matter of seconds it dissolved away to nothing. The curve of my wound made it appear as if it were smiling at me. Ah hell...

"What happened?" Fleur clutched at the potion satchel, her knuckles near-white.

"Do you know any healing charms?" I asked slowly. *Saturnia... you bitch.*

"*Oui*, a few, but zat salve, 'Arry, should 'ave mended you. There is dark magic in that wound – we need to get you to a hospital. Can you walk to the fireplace?"

"Can't go to a hospital," I said, shaking my head. "Too many folks of the wrong sort looking for me."

"Zen what?"

"Can you try a healing charm? Just anything?"

"I do not know enough to seal a wound like that, but a blood clotting spell... this may sting a little."

I lifted my left arm, giving Fleur a clear shot at the cut. "Be gentle..."

Fleur placed the tip of her wand just above my wound. "*Verios*," she whispered, and a clear blue stream of liquid light floated from the tip of her wand and settled over my side. The magic hung there for a moment, just above my skin, and then faded away to nothing.

A steady trickle of blood followed the same path as the rest down to my jeans. The charm hadn't worked, not in the slightest. I picked up the damp towel and dabbed it away.

Fleur looked at the wound and then up into my eyes. "'Arry, that is not natural. What happened to you?"

Saturnia tsked. "*Tut, tut, Harry, just for that, I'm afraid that no magical charms or potions will be able to heal that wound I gave you. No, no... it will have to fix itself the old fashioned way, the more painful way.*"

"The wound was cursed," I said, dreading what I had to do next. "Nothing magical can heal this – it has to be done the old fashioned way, the more painful way. I have to give it *time*... goddamn poetic irony."

“What does that mean? Ze Muggle way?” Her eyes widened. Fleur shook her head. “I *insist* we take you to a hospital, ‘Arry.”

I shook my head. “I need some thread, Fleur, the stuff you might use for sewing. Cotton’s no good, needs to be something stronger, smoother.”

“You cannot be serious.”

I removed my wand from my back pocket and pointed it at the piece of cork that had stoppered the vial of pain-relief potion. “*Origil*,” I said, swift and sure, and transfigured the cork into a thin needle with a curved hook at one end – a crude, yet effective imitation of a proper surgical needle.

“I can’t possibly stitch your—”

“I’ll do it myself, it’s okay.” I smiled reassuringly. “Not the first time, probably won’t be the last... but I need some thread – nylon would be good, or silk, something artificial like polyester.”

Fleur reluctantly left the bathroom again, looking over her shoulder at me as if I were insane – which might’ve been a valid concern, but when you had the sort of enemies I had... this was the better way. Less people died when I did things myself – in the beginning anyway, before the world was plunged into war.

I picked up the curved needle, not quite unlike a fishing hook, and pricked my thumb with it, drawing a bead of blood. Oh yeah, it was sharp enough. I cleaned the wound as best I could whilst waiting for Fleur to return.

She came back with a wicker basket of sewing utensils – knitting needles, twine, cord, coloured wool, spare buttons... and thread. Most of it was cotton, worse than useless, and some of the stronger cords had a lot of coloured dye in them, which was bad. There was some good stuff though at the bottom of the basket – navy blue silk thread. Close enough for this work.

"I don't know if I can watch this, 'Arry," Fleur said. Her beauty was always so composed and untouchable, yet she looked a little sick, contemplating what I was about to do.

"It'll only take five minutes – I'll use some of that numbing powder, if it works."

I slipped the thread through the eye of the needle. There'd be a little tearing because of that eye, where it bulged, but other than that everything should be fine.

I'd learnt how to do this in the future, more than once. As civilisation crumbled and less and less people resisted the rise of the Dark Lord, trained Healers and healing potions became scarce. I'd learnt a lot from Muggles about surviving during those dark days to come... stitching myself back up after a fight the least of it all.

The numbing powder tingled as it set to work, and work it did – thank Merlin for small mercies. Well, here goes...

I used the mirror instead of straining my neck and dug in from beneath the cut, hooking the needle through my flesh and pulling the long piece of silk thread almost all the way through, allowing for a little slack. It was only mildly discomforting, thanks to the pain-relief potion and the numbing powder.

Fleur excused herself after about half a minute, once I began to pull the severed skin together in a tight stitch, one hand over her mouth. Some people are just squeamish, I guess.

It took a little longer than five minutes, closer to quarter of an hour, as I feared breaking the thread, which was never meant to hold human flesh together, yet soon I had eight little stitches spaced evenly along the knife-wound, tight enough to stem the bleeding. I raised my arm up and down a few times, testing the strength. They'd hold, and I'd have a cool new scar in a week or two.

"There we go then," I said, discarding the needle and taking a moment to sit down on the edge of the bathtub. I was feeling a little dizzy.

Fleur had been waiting just outside, checking on me every minute or so. She came back in and cleaned up the mess of potions and thread.

“Are you okay, ‘Arry?”

I thought about that for a moment. I needed a bandage to wrap around my chest, and some antiseptic cream, disinfectant alcohol, but other than that things were as well as they could be, all things considered. I still had my briefcase, the precious manuscript, the Time-Turner and the Ring of Concealment. All was still going to plan, give or take a few unexplained setbacks...

How had the demons found me? How had Saturnia found me?

And I was with Fleur – who either thought I was incredibly stupid or incredibly brave.

“I’m okay. Just going to take it easy for the next few hours...”

“I should say so!”

“Ha, how have you been, Fleur?”

“Not as busy as you, eet seems.” She picked up my bloodied black shirt and held it over the sink. “*Scourgify!*”

“Thanks.” I used the cleaning charm on the left leg of my jeans, scrubbing away the blood there, and slipped back into the shirt.

“I’m surprised you didn’t faint. Most men ‘ave a low tolerance for pain.”

I laughed. “Pain-relief potion, remember? I’ll start crying in about an hour when it wears off...” Fleur held my arm as I stood up, taking care not to pop my new stitches.

“Is there anything you need, ‘Arry? Water?”

“Ah, well I’m here for afternoon tea – it is Thursday, isn’t it?”

Fleur found a smile. “*Oui* – I did not think to see you back. There is ice-tea in the kitchen. Shall we head out into the sun?”

"Sounds great." I met her eyes and held them for a moment, searching for something special. "I fear I owe you an explanation or two."

***A/N:** Phew... there we go. I wrote like 10,000 of these words today, caught in a blaze of writing. Last few days I barely got a sentence out. Feels good to have another chapter down, and to bring another familiar character back into the story, as well as introducing a beautiful and deadly villain that mothers Harry a bit.*

Hmm... what do you think? Tear it to pieces, folks. A lot kinda happened but at least we've moved on like a whole day. This story is probably shaping up to cover the whole summer before sixth-year, with the possibility of a sequel if I don't screw this one up and you all stop reading.

Heh, that won't happen, right? Cos' I did good? Let me know in a review,

joe

***A/N 2 (03/06/08):** Sorry about the long gap between updates, folks. I'm hitting finals week now so the dry spell is nearly over. I expect to update this story by the end of June. Thanks.*

Chapter 9 – High Up Above

Baby, do you remember when?
Fireworks at Lake Michigan...
Now I'm coming home again,
Maybe we can start again...

--Chris Martin

I felt weak and dizzy under the warm cloudless sky, my back to the Delacour family home and a pitcher of sparkling ice tea sitting between me and the girl I would (had) set the world ablaze for. The chequered picnic blanket beneath me was large enough for two, and Fleur looked radiant in the sun, her legs folded carefully beneath her, her toenails painted a deep red, and the strap of her summer dress slipping just off the peak of her shoulder.

I sipped casually at my drink, my pale face a mask of indifference, disguising the swooning discomfort I felt. I'd lost a lot of blood, I supposed, more than usual, and the sight of Fleur sent what little blood I had left pumping all the faster.

"Nice tea," I said. "Nice day. Nice view." A large swath of French countryside, a meadow in full bloom, stretched towards the distant hills before the horizon. Nothing disturbed the serenity save the gentle breeze and the calm bubbling of the fountain in the swimming pool away to my left.

We could have been alone in the whole world. A large, empty world of nothing but sunshine and meadow flowers – I'd give *eternity* for something so simple.

Fleur tilted her head and gazed at me through a curtain of golden hair, her eyes sharp and curious, as if trying to pierce my mind. "Are you being purposefully blasé, 'Arry? I tell you now, I will 'ave none of it!"

I grinned. "Forgive me, it has been a busy few days."

"You do not look well."

"I'll be fine – tea is working wonders on me. So is the fresh air."

“Blasé, ‘Arry.”

“Sorry.” I took a deep breath, stretching the stitches in my side. I winced and let my breath out slow. “Really though, I’ve been stuck in stuffy old libraries and such – its nice to get out.”

“You were stabbed in a library?” Fleur’s cool indifference, that aspect of her that was all at once cruel and beautiful, gave way to surprise.

“Nope, I was stabbed in a hotel lobby in Italy, by a... well, by a goddess, if the evidence so far is to be believed.”

Fleur blinked. “I’m not sure I follow you, ‘Arry.”

I shrugged. “I’ve no real explanation for it, Fleur. Did you- have you heard anything about the Death Eater who tried to kill you the other day?”

Fleur nodded. “*Oui*, yes. I received a missive from your Ministry only yesterday, demanding my return to England immediately.”

“Safer to be here,” I said.

“My father agrees – he has friends in *our* Ministry who will sort this matter out. In ze mean time, I will not be returning to Britain.”

“That’s probably for the best,” I replied honestly, half a dozen memories of the path the future could take spinning through my mind. None of them were good for Fleur if she returned to England, yet a few of them were terrible here in France, as well. That’s where I stepped in and saved the feckin’ day.

“I suppose so, yes.”

A comfortable silence fell between us then. I had been expecting a little more awkwardness than had so far presented itself – what with my unexpected bloody arrival and my lack of adequate explanation, yet Fleur seemed content to simply gaze out at the expansive countryside, sipping her tea and respecting my privacy. That was all to the good – how could I explain Saturnia without brushing the eternity my life had become?

I'm Harry Potter, fifteen years old (a week and a bit away from sixteen) and yet I've memories of older men, of older Harry Potters burning through my mind. A thousand, thousand images and half-forgotten fuzzy glimpses of futures that had come and gone, and come and gone again and again and again...

How old could I claim to be, really? I felt fifteen-nearly-sixteen. I was fifteen-nearly-sixteen. And yet... men who were not me and yet were Harry Potter had angered gods and demons in the future and brought those troubles crashing down upon my younger shoulders. I was them and I was me, and they were me too...

And then there was Voldemort at the head of it all. Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Shadowy players so far this summer... yet they were out there, the greatest threat facing the world, and then some. In a few days, a week at the most, I should catch up to them all.

That was a lot of responsibility for fifteen-nearly-sixteen, especially with the power of the Lost City of Atlantis thrown into the whole turbulent mix. Like trying to build a house of cards in a sandstorm, I could feel the foundations of the whole world buckling...

Fuck it – I was hurting and all on my own for the most part, this afternoon I was going to enjoy the goddamned ice tea and the precious company of Fleur Delacour.

"You make it 'ard to 'ave a normal conversation, 'Arry," Fleur said, tilting her head and gazing at me from within an air of regal dignity. *Cruel and beautiful.* "You were thinking dark thoughts just now, I could see it on your face. Was it ze Death Eaters that attacked you?"

"Nope, that's still to come, once I reach Atlantis." I switched subjects. "Has Albus Dumbledore been in contact with you, Fleur?"

"*Non,*" she replied, crinkling her nose at the mention of Atlantis. "Should I expect him, hmm?"

"Possibly – he doesn't like me running around on my own – and he knows we left England together day before yesterday."

"Are you asking me to lie for you if he comes calling?"

"No, not at all." I drained my glass of ice tea in one long swallow and for a moment felt a refreshing and cool burst bite into the raw heat in my side. "He knows I'm after Atlantis – he doesn't understand why or how, or where this has all come from – but he knows. "

Fleur frowned in mock-frustration. "I do not understand how or why either, 'Arry. Forgive me, but zere are more important things happening in our world, that you seem to be a part of, than old treasure hunts for mythical cities."

"Hmm... you would think so," I replied, and leaned back on the picnic blanket, stretching my chest and resting my head on my hands. Sitting up was playing bloody murder on my stab wound. "What's today? July 16th? Voldemort stumbled upon Atlantis two days ago, and he's already there, Fleur, unravelling its secrets and... *protections*. I'm going to stop him."

"Just like that?"

I yawned. The summer-sun and dizziness from the blood loss were making me drowsy. "That, or something like it. Trust me, it's a good plan – tearing all the power and wealth of the ancient world out of the hands of the monster that murdered my parents."

"You must realise how hard this is to believe, 'Arry. You speak of fairytales, of myth, and not of the real world." Fleur brushed a few loose strands of her golden hair behind her ear, gazing at me with those clear blue eyes, waiting for me to divulge all the secrets of time and space – if she only knew.

"Voldemort and I share a... connection," I said, yawning again. It was so damn relaxing, and being near Fleur lowered my guard, made me feel *safe*. "Through the scar on my forehead. It's awful, but I can see into his mind, and sometimes he into mine." I wasn't any more forthcoming than that. I didn't want Fleur knowing how... *tainted* I was. "Anyways, Death Eater activity isn't what it should be because he's distracted at the moment on the power he's found – or *thinks* he's found."

"And you just came up with this all by yourself? Atlantis? This plan to challenge You Know Who and rewrite wizarding history?"

I nodded, my eyes heavy and the warm sun inviting dreams and forgetfulness. The pain in my side was almost a dull ache, much akin to the unrelenting headache between my eyes. Over my heart, that time-scar from my death in Diagon Alley was burning with a deep itch.

“All by myself,” I said. “The why and the how of it, Fleur, is not something I can explain...” My eyes were really heavy – I was drifting into sleep, into blissful rest. It was only early afternoon, just gone lunch time, yet I’d done a lot of adventuring and time-travelling, a lot of fighting and drinking, over the last two days. “For the why and the how, sweetheart...” I was mumbling, on the edge of sleep. Fleur looked down upon me, her radiance haloed by the sun up in the endless blue sky. “To understand the why and the how of this mess... you’ll have to come with me.”

If there was a reply, I didn’t hear it, as my eyes blinked closed and sleep overcame even my tempered resolve.

So there I was, drowning in an ocean of memories and... fire.

I’d watched countless enemies, countless friends and allies, fall screaming into the jaws of Oblivion.

Along with empires and nations – swept away in a maelstrom of insanity and high-pitched laughter.

Sometimes I don’t know where I’m heading, where I’m going with my life (don’t we all, hmm), yet why do I still fight the inevitability of Time?

I struggle to even remember what time (Time... TimE... TiMe... TiMe) is these days. What it means to me, and what it used to mean.

Where am I?

“Time’s up, Harry.”

I laughed. “Oh, Time is never up.”

"You ran a fair race, boy – from Godric's Hollow to my father's gravestone, from the shores of Atlantis to the ruins of Hogwarts. No one can fault your resolve, your will, at the end." A heavy pause. "Despite my best efforts, you will be remembered as the greatest threat to my power."

I gazed unblinking into the crimson eyes of Lord Voldemort – my nemesis, my equal – and laughed again. It was laugh or scream. That's what it always comes down to in the end; the right kind of insanity. Overhead, a sharp bolt of clear blue lightning sizzled through the clouds, cutting my abrupt laughter short with a clap of thunder. "Maybe yes... maybe no. There's not many left to remember this time. You win this round, Voldemort."

"Well, you and I both know there was never any doubt as to who would emerge triumphant."

"I've not given up yet, you know," I replied, almost conversationally, as if over drinks. I guess I might have sounded a little regretful.

"You are dead, Harry – the race is run. It is futile to resist now. There is no one left to die in your place."

I had fallen against a steel bracket supporting the remains of the Ministry. It was cold and it was dark, and I was alone. Thick railroad spikes of rusted iron were punched through the flesh of my wrists, and two more through the meat of my thighs. I was literally nailed to a cross. It would be rather symbolic if there was anyone left alive to appreciate that crap.

"I guess I'll see you in another life then..." I whispered.

I awoke with a start, for a moment forgetting where and when I was. I sat up quickly, too quickly, and regretted it just as fast as a fierce lance of pain shot through my side and across my heart. I sucked in a deep breath and put a hand inside my shirt, checking to see if I'd just popped my stitches.

"Ooh..." Fleur said, wincing. "That looked like it hurt."

The sun was still bright in the sky and my stitches were still good and tight. There was a little blood, but it was hardly anything. "Stung a little, yeah," I said. "I –er- fell asleep?"

"Just for a half hour, 'Arry. Do you know you frown in your sleep?"

I reached behind me and removed my wand from my pocket. My back was aching from where it had been digging into me as I slept. "Really?" I smiled. Fleur still looked gorgeous glistening in the sun in her summer dress. She held her book in one hand marked with her finger. "Can't believe I fell asleep."

Fleur nodded. "You are terrible company, 'Arry Potter, or you must find me simply dull. You arrive here shoeless and wounded and then promptly fall asleep during conversation." She *tsked*. "*Jeunes magiciens!*"

I laughed, ignoring the throbbing in my side. "You're not dull, you make me smile, and this is just an inconvenient scratch."

"Oh, *oui*," Fleur replied, smiling herself now. It was nice to feel young. "A cursed scratch that cannot be healed with magic? I may forgive that, however eet does not excuse your lack of shoes."

"Will a rose?" I asked, twirling my wand between my hands. Wordlessly, working along a memory I scarcely recognised from the future, I conjured a flawless white rose from the tip of my wand in a shower of silver sparks. I handed it to Fleur with a flourish. "Mind the thorns."

Fleur shook her head, but accepted the flower with a smile. "No, no, 'Arry. I expect ze heroes that save my life to be properly attired at all times, come Death Eaters or Dark Lords. *This* rose does not forgive you."

"Ah, a pity..." It was nice to feel young, yet I felt older than I was. Fifteen-nearly-sixteen going on two hundred. Talking to Fleur, however, almost flirting with Fleur, made me feel old enough to know better yet too young to care. It was nice to grasp these small moments where I could forget about Atlantis and Voldemort, and horrifying dreams of the end of the world.

"It is quite beautiful, however," Fleur conceded, bringing the dew-soaked petals to her nose. "And it smells all too real. Impressive magic, 'Arry, yet I fear you do zis for all ze girls, no?"

"White roses? No. Something far too special about white roses – they're just for the girls who give me ice tea and a place to stitch myself up." I placed my wand on the picnic blanket between us, against the now-warm pitcher of tea and stretched my arms out as far as I could without tearing my side open.

"And a place to fall asleep."

"And that."

Fleur had picked up her own wand and prodded mine with it. Her wand was slender and elegant, recently polished and untarnished. Mine was faded and chipped in a few places, grooved and worn. She shook her head. "Even your wand is scruffy, 'Arry," she said, and placed the stem of the white rose between the pages of her book and put it aside. "You are charming and scruffy."

"That wand's seen me through the last few years," I said, leaping to its defence. "Watch this..." I raised my hand and, concentrating really hard, clicked my fingers and smirked as my wand flew up off the blanket and into my waiting hand.

Fleur raised her eyebrows. "A touch of wandless magic?"

"Lots and lots of practice went into that." I took a deep breath and rose to my feet, collecting my briefcase full of cash and that all-too important manuscript. "I'm going to head into town – Carcassonne, wasn't it? – and pick up some new shoes, maybe another of those fancy suits seeing as how bad guys broke the last one." I met Fleur's eyes. "It was nice seeing you again, Fleur."

Fleur rose as well. "You are leaving so soon, 'Arry? The day is still young. I was going to ask if you would like to stay for dinner."

I paused, searching the memories I could recall of today. There weren't many, and as always they were fuzzy and mostly incomplete, yet this felt new. This hadn't happened before. Change was

sometimes good – was it because of my bloody arrival? Or the subtle changes that were rippling outwards from my contact with the demons and Saturnia? Either way...

“Romantic candlelit dinner for two, huh?” I said, and nearly ruined it with a blush as Fleur regarded me with that look of cruel beauty. A look that had sent many men running scared before me.

Then she smiled, and I very nearly bolted. “A few friends from Beauxbatons that I ‘ave not seen in some time, zere partners and such. Six of us, seven including you.”

I hesitated. “Anyone likely to recognise me?” I asked, feeling slightly embarrassed.

Fleur frowned. “*Oui*, yes. Emilie and Grace from ze Tri-Wizard Tournament, if nothing else. You are in ze papers here more often these days, ‘Arry. Is eet a problem?”

I shrugged and weighed up my options. There were goblins and goddesses, demons and Dark Lords, who might make it a problem. Yet Saturnia had what she wanted, my blood, but the way she had spoken made me think she wasn’t working alone – there was someone who had taken me seriously – and he had sent those blasted ugly fuckers Tweedledum and Tweedledee after me... Voldemort and Death Eaters weren’t a concern, not for a week or too, but the goblins could create trouble if they tracked me down... *What to do, what to do?*

“You frown a lot more than you should, ‘Arry,” Fleur said, pulling me from my thoughts and resting her hand gently on my arm. A shiver ran through me from her touch that I hope she didn’t notice. “You should spend some time resting, you know, you were just stabbed!”

“Just a scratch...” I said.

“I am heading into Carcassonne myself, to buy some ingredients for dinner. You could help me prepare – if you can cook as well as you charm all ze girls then I may never let you leave.”

It was a joke, some mild flirting, and yet her hand was still on my arm.

“Why not?” I said a moment later, and saying it felt really good – like relief.

“*Magnifique!* Wait here, I will just get my purse.”

I watched Fleur head back into the large château, her hair as bright as the sun and the hem of her dress swaying about her legs. She was beautiful, gorgeous, and happy to know me. I let out a slow breath.

Damn it all, if Voldemort had even an ounce of Veela-charm I would've been dead a long time ago...

When Fleur returned we walked to the edge of her garden, just outside of the wards, and Apparated a few miles east to the outskirts of the fortified, medieval town of Carcassonne. We had been here just two days ago, and a lot had happened to me since then, yet it was only just beginning...

Our first stop was the expensive suit shop I had been fitted in only two days ago. The tailor remembered me, and thankfully did not ask any questions as I bought the same style of Armani wool-cut suit again, and a few pairs of socks as well as a pair of shiny black shoes.

Straightening my overcoat in the mirror, I saw Fleur looking at me pensively in the reflection, still in her summer dress and feet clad in simple white high heels. I think she was marvelling at the sweeping change that came over me when I slipped on something presentable like this. I think, to her, I looked more like the reluctant hero I was supposed to be.

Hero... I thought. No, not at all. *I've failed far too many times to be called a hero.*

I slipped my wand into the inner pocket of my suit jacket and put both my worn clothes back into my briefcase, along with the modified Time-Turner still stuffed into my jeans. I was definitely short on living space, but I crammed them in there alongside half of the most important book ever written and nearly a million pounds in various Muggle denominations.

“Tout bien, monsieur?” the old tailor asked, brushing my new silk overcoat free of dust with a tiny brush.

“Merci,” I said, holding Fleur’s eyes with mine in the mirror for a moment. Still searching for that something special, I don’t think I saw it, yet eye contact was a good sign, wasn’t it? *Priorities, Harry,* I thought. It was still early days, and I was reading way too much into a casual glance in the mirror. I did look good, damn it.

I parted with several thousand more American dollars for suit number two, and hoped I managed to make it last more than a day and a half this time. Our next stop was a pharmacy near the fresh food markets for some Muggle medicine including bandages, rubbing alcohol, and disinfectant, that should see my stitches last and latest wound heal without infection. The last thing I needed was to be laid out in a hospital somewhere with blood-poisoning or worse for a few days. Thank you very much, Saturnia, whatever you and your demons are.

My greatest concern in regards to Saturnia and her demon entourage was their seeming ability to negate magic as I knew it. Wizarding magic, wand magic, the kind I kinda relied on to stay in the game, could be severed in close proximity to these unknown players... It was disturbing, to say the least. And thoughts for another time.

Although my little finger-clicking trick with my wand was a good sign. Magic I had spent lifetimes learning, magic I had died for time and time again, seemed to be coming back to me. It was still too early to have gained all my power, for my mind to have sorted all of my new knowledge of lives gone by – but that was to come. Again, thoughts for another time.

Fleur and I spent the next half an hour wandering all the open stalls of fresh food, tasting bits of everything and purchasing several large salmon on ice and two dozen or so fat Swiss mushrooms. I wasn’t a flash cook, unless it came to frying meat and/or tomatoes and eggs for breakfast, but I could help carry.

“It’s a nice day,” I said gently, as we browsed the heavy markets. Part of me, the older time-weary part, was still getting used to being around so many people again. Where I’d come from, a world a few

years away, not too many people were left to group together like this. "S'good to be out in the sun."

"You are my apprentice this afternoon, 'Arry Potter," Fleur said. "We just need some herbs and lemons and we can head home and straight into ze kitchen." Her tone softened. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine," I said, a little breathless. My side was burning something fierce, and yet I wasn't quite ready to give up this sunny afternoon just yet. There was something so normal about all of this that I clung to it almost as desperately as a drowning man would a life vest. On the outside, however, I guess I looked a little uncomfortable what with my old stab wound screaming for attention.

Oh well. The world could wait an afternoon. We soon found lemons so fresh they stung the eyes, and herbs with roots still clinging to the earth they had grown in.

Dressed for the occasion, carrying enough food for seven, Fleur and I Apparated back to her family home to do some cooking for the next few hours, and after that... *socialise*. I felt out of sorts, as if I were encroaching upon a new world. A world where I didn't honestly belong. A world where I could look and act the part, but only on the surface.

Yet I was with Fleur. After years away, after years at the end of the world living under a tortured fiery sky, after years that hadn't happened, I was with Fleur. All too soon I'd be back to Voldemort and the hunt for Atlantis, back to war and fighting and innocent people dying.

I just wish that the whole 'people-dying' thing didn't feel more comfortable than a small dinner party with a group of eighteen-year old French girls, one of whom was part-Veela, that might all be impressed with the Dark Lord-duelling English boy.

Time seems to me, at times, to be a neutral force. A force of balances.

Nothing changes, the past is so far away, the universe can course-correct...

Fate has blocked all the exits and more and more often I feel as though I'm fighting a futile battle against inevitability. Oh well...

Time and tide wait for no man.

Could I cook? Well, maybe yes and maybe no...

The large kitchen in Fleur's home, complete with shiny marble bench tops and hanging silver pans looked like a bomb had hit it. Flour was powdered over much of everything, hanging in the air, and three pots of boiling water let off a steady stream of steam which condensed on the windows looking out into the gardens in heavy, warm drops.

"Did you chop ze onions, 'Arry?" Fleur called from the oven.

"Oh yeah," I sniffed, the damn bulbs making me cry. I haven't cried in bloody years. "One more to go."

It had been a busy few hours, the sun was low on the horizon nestled between the peaks of the distant hills, and warm twilight coated our little part of the world. I was still wearing my new suit pants and black shoes, however I'd taken off my jacket and rolled my sleeves up. Fleur had provided a chef's apron and a bandana to tie my hair back.

"The salmon is a *leetle* too crumbly – more lemon juice! Or perhaps we should 'ave you sew it back together, 'Arry, *non*?"

"Ha ha," I said, dicing the onion into fine little cubes. "Those mushrooms smell delicious."

Fleur gazed into the wood-fired oven, casting a critical eye over the main course. "That *iz* all ze salmon juice they are soaking up. Twenty more minutes or so..."

I had streaks of flour in my hair along with one or two stains on my five hundred dollar silk shirt, yet Fleur had managed to avoid all of the

mess, and danced all-too gracefully about the kitchen. Fairly early on she had stuck me in one place to do all the manly chopping of onions and such. I definitely got in the way, but we were having fun.

I was having fun, but Atlantis and Voldemort were preying heavily on my mind. With things changing this time around, and not for the better, I didn't want to delay my one-man expedition any longer than necessary. Easier said than done though, what with Fleur Delacour wanting to spend time with me, and the burning in my side sapping me of any desire to jump back into the maelstrom of war – a maelstrom that I was, in part, creating.

"You are frowning again, 'Arry, and I will 'ave none of it in my kitchen!"

"Sorry," I said, turning that frown into a smile. "Onion's all done."

"Place eet in the marinade, please."

I picked up my chopping board of diced onion and moved over to the steaming pots in front of the window, looking out on the back gardens. I scraped the onion into the pot on low heat with some olive oil and a smattering of chopped herbs.

There was a tapping on the window.

Through the condensed steam I caught sight of a familiar pair of amber eyes and a hooked beak, all attached to a snowy-white plumage. A genuine smile crossed my features. I put down the knife and chopping board and moved to the heavy-oak back door.

"Hedwig," I said, opening the door and holding out my arm for my owl. The bird hesitated, and then with an annoyed squawk leapt up onto my forearm. "Okay, what's the matter?"

She nipped my ear, hard enough to sting.

"Ow, what was that for?" I said, as Fleur laughed – clear and beautiful – from across the kitchen.

"Ah, your charm has run out, 'Arry. *Enfin!* How far 'as she 'ad to fly to reach you?"

"Heh, I've been moving around a lot, haven't I?" I asked Hedwig, and she bobbed her head up and down. Uncannily like a nod of agreement. "Well, it's better than being cooped up back in Surrey, isn't it?" The blasted owl nipped my ear again. "Oh, okay, so that's how it is?"

Hedwig squawked and flapped her wings, clearly not impressed.

"I'm happy to see you, you know. And isn't the south of France lovely to fly through?"

Hedwig hooted in a way that could almost be mistaken for a concession of agreement.

I picked up the spare crust from the loaf of bread that Fleur had ground into crumbs for the salmon and offered it to my owl. She accepted it gracefully in one talon with a *trill* of forgiveness, and nipped at my ear – affectionately this time.

"There we go, honey," I said softly, stroking Hedwig's neck. "It's always good to see you arrive safe, you know."

Fleur giggled. "Aw, ze rumours say 'Arry Potter is single - clearly he is spoken for." She stood with one hand holding a sieve, and the other resting on her curvaceous hip, gazing at me with a small smile playing about her lips. "Perhaps I should feel 'eart-broken and jealousy, *non?*"

Hedwig took flight from my arm and back out into dwindling light of the day, tearing into her crust of bread. I closed the door behind her and from the window Fleur and I watched her disappear up into the branches of one of the large trees bordering her family's chateau.

"No, no, I'm painfully single," I said, with a touch of bitterness. "Any girl that gets me gets a war and a death sentence, as well."

Fleur scoffed. "A foolish reason to be alone. Zere is no one special to you?"

Oh, this was hard. My resolve could transcend the boundaries of time, yet I was never strong enough to turn away from Fleur Delacour... or Nymphadora Tonks. Time diverges down so many alternate pathways – *all the time* – that my memories, what I perceive of the future, are forever uncertain. Have I had this conversation before? Will I have it again? Not if travelling back in time became harder, became closer to killing me – as it showed all signs of doing.

“In the future... there might be,” I offered by way of compromise. It was better than stating the alternative.

Fleur opened her mouth to speak and then decided against it, biting her bottom lip. I watched her fight with herself for a moment, before she came to some decision.

“*Eet* is just as well, ‘Arry, I suppose. Dating, relationships, and love are such ‘ard work zese days.”

Was there truth in that? Definitely yes... and definitely no. Relationships were dangerous. Love in relationships, doubly so. Men had been tearing civilisation apart for millennia in the name of love. The way she looked, the way she was, Fleur probably knew that better than most – even if she didn’t know she knew... that she knew.

Yeah.

“Well, you’d know...” I said, a second before my tiny brain realised how insulting that sounded.

“Oh I would, would I?” All at once Fleur’s expression became closely guarded, and her glare was fit to freeze the blood in my veins.

“Only that you’re beautiful,” I recovered quickly. “Gorgeous, even... you have this-this *charm*, about you, Fleur.” Damn, still not really the best choice of words.

“I am part *Veela*, ‘Arry – you knew this, no? The charm you see iz both a blessing and a curse. You seem little affected by eet, yet men can become... *aggressive*, for my attentions...”

"I am affected," I said quietly, a near whisper. Why were the memories of eternity swirling through my mind? *Burning* through my mind? "By *you*, Fleur, not by some charm."

A heavy pause. Perhaps I'd gone too far – too soon. Things were becoming vastly different this time around.

Fleur's lips twitched. "Well, I am very nearly blushing..."

I nodded. I needed some space to think, to catch my breath. "You'll be all okay here if I go clean my stitches? Do you mind if I use the shower?"

"*Non*," Fleur replied softly. "Zere are plenty of towels in ze cupboard."

Untying my apron and bandana, I grabbed my jacket and briefcase and made a quick getaway as Fleur returned to the wood-fired oven, the picture of elegance and grace. Had I made an ass out of myself? Did I look as inadequate as I felt? Only three days ago I had been a kid without a clue, now I was a kid who knew how badly he could fail, and yet here I was making the same old mistakes in brand new ways.

Because time was running out.

If nothing else, I felt that in my very bones. Time was running out. But for what? And for who? For me? For the world?

Time was running out. And it had barely been three days since I had begun to plunge the world into war. What was that old saying? *Society is only ever two days and three meals away from collapse*. That or something like it – hits home hard.

My stitches held together some very tender, very raw, and very bloody skin. I had taken my shirt off, and in Fleur's bathroom, looking at my reflection in the mirror, I pondered just what I'd do to that maniacal bitch Saturnia when I caught up with her. *No one* did this to me and got away with it. *No one* could use Time against me – Time was mine. I wrapped it around my little finger... and commanded it to change the world.

I was grateful for the hot shower – I turned the water on near-scolding – and filled up the bathroom with steamy air. I began to feel a little drowsy again in the steam, yet after hopping out of the shower, towel wrapped around my waist, I applied the disinfectant and alcohol swipes to my stab wound and the pain of that woke me up rather fast.

I *scourgified* the minor stains on my shirt from the cooking adventure and slipped back into my suit – the only set of clothes I had with me save for the bloody jeans and shirt at the bottom of my briefcase – placing my wand firmly inside my jacket on the left side. It felt comfortable there, poking out of the deep inner-pocket.

The Ring of Concealment felt heavy on my index finger, yet it was doing its job well – and still had work to do before Atlantis – and all that was missing was the Time Turner around my neck. I opened my briefcase and dug through the pockets of my jeans until I found it.

“What to make of you...” I said softly, staring at the sparkling hourglass before the mirror.

Saturnia had changed it so that it could not only reverse time, but accelerate it. That was something new – that was a change, a skewed pathway of what I had experienced of times before. I could think of no conceivable reason I would have to travel *forward* in time. I needed all the time I could get. Although I wondered if I could travel forward, and then back again – heh, I could know the future...

That was a dangerous idea – I slipped the Time Turner over my head and hid it well under my shirt and against my chest.

With my track record, I’d probably do more harm than good.

I saw you smiling at me.

Do you know what the trouble is with doing something right the first time? Nobody knows how had it was. For everyone but me, this was the first time – and for no one save me, it is also the last time.

We don’t have a lot of time; in fact, we have no time.

The salmon dishes were wrapped in tinfoil and the vegetables and sides were simmering on the stove at a low heat when I returned to the kitchen. The first thing I noticed was that Fleur wasn't there.

A moment of unease gripped me – just for a moment – until I heard soft footsteps on the floorboards down the hall. I followed the sound to its source, and found Fleur within one of the large rooms at the front of the house, twilight pouring in through the windows.

It was her father's study, and the family library. The room was big, and three of the four walls were devoted to towering bookcases packed with leather-bound books of all shapes and sizes. There were thousands of spellbooks, novels, history tomes, and works of non-fiction. There was a large mahogany desk and several long sofas and standing lamps. Fleur sat on the arm of one of these plush sofas, thumbing through a thick book with a creaky spine.

"I remembered something zat you may be interested in, 'Arry," she said, gesturing me into the room.

"Yeah? What's that?"

Fleur smiled – it lit up the room more than the pale twilight ever could. "My mother used to read me stories from zis book as a child. I remembered one in particular just a moment ago."

This seemed familiar – déjà vu – and yet, I couldn't place any particular future-memory to this moment. Maybe it was new, maybe not...

"Fairytale?" I asked.

"*Oui*," Fleur shrugged self-consciously, and her nose twitched. It was so goddamn cute. "Here we are, this story – *Ze King of Roses and ze Shambling Bone-Men*."

The house was warm and I was still feeling comfortably hot from my steamy shower, yet I felt a chill rush through me as Fleur spoke the words of that title. I had learnt to trust my instincts over the long years,

and I proceeded with caution... books were very dangerous things, after all.

“What’s it about?” I asked.

“I will read to you,” Fleur replied. “Hear, sit with me.”

She moved down into the sofa proper and I, my heart beating a little faster, sat down next to her, close enough to place my arm around her shoulders and pull her close. I resisted the urge.

“I remember zis being one of my favourites. It is not that long, but it might make you smile.”

“Why’s that?” Fleur was wearing some sort of perfume – yet all I could smell was strawberries and fresh rainfall, the scent that was *her*. I felt dizzy.

“Just you wait and see.” She opened the book on her lap. “*Ze King of Roses and ze Shambling Bone-Men. Once upon a time...*”

Once upon a time, far away and long ago, in olden times when wishing still helped one, there lived a king. He was the wisest, oldest, and kindest king in the entire world, and the sun shone down brightly on his kingdom of Atlantis, and brightest of all upon the king’s royal garden of elegant roses.

Fleur looked up at me and I smiled. “Atlantis, is it? Keep going.”

“*After many long years under...*”

After many long years under the king’s wise rule, the kingdom of Atlantis was greater and grander than any that had gone before it, or any that would come after it. Great sea-ships as tall as mountains rested in harbours of marble-stone, sea-ships that could take to the sky and fly amongst the cities in the clouds. Rare metals and ore, precious jewels and gemstones, were so plentiful that the cobblestone streets of Atlantis were paved with gold and rubies. Yet the greatest treasure and marvel of Atlantis was the king’s rose garden, which people would come from halfway across the world to see.

Now on one occasion, as the king was tending to his roses, his heart grew heavy, for a great storm had been brewing on the horizon for many days, and had become a burden on his old shoulders. He feared the storm's ferocity would damage his gardens and undo the work of more than fifty years.

"I shall weep to make the very stones pity me," the king said as night fell, "should anything happen to my roses."

"We will stay and protect your gardens, sire," the Captain of the King's Guard said, stamping his spear against the golden steps of the castle. "One hundred good men to see the storm through."

For a moment the king's burden lightened, and yet as the storm clouds rolled in and fierce claps of thunder shook the very towers of Castle Atlantis, the king's troubles returned. Before long thick and heavy raindrops began to fall in a shower as heavy as a waterfall. It was the greatest storm the old king had ever known.

"This will not do at all," the king muttered to himself, pacing in his chamber at the top of the topmost tower. "Surely, this storm is the work of a dark magician."

Icy fear gripped the king's heart as bolts of tremendous blue lightning tore down through the sky, cutting right through the rain. In between clouts of thunder, the harsh sound of metal striking metal, and cries of battle drifted up and through the great arched windows of the king's tower.

"Why, there is fighting in my gardens!" he exclaimed, stepping quickly over to his royal table and grasping for his crown.

The wise old king ran down the thousands of steps of his tower in the greatest haste of his life. He paused only once to remove a sword of shiny silver from a suit of armour, and thrust open the large doors of his castle with a cry. Outside in the gardens, the king knew his fears of a dark magician had been correct.

"My king!" cried the Captain of the Guard. "The Shambling Bone-Men have come. They ride the lightning of the storm!"

The Captain and his men were standing strong before the length of the rose gardens, swords and spears held grimly before the darkest creatures of the night. The old king beheld the shambling and ungainly shapes threatening his soldiers and his gardens, and his brow furrowed into a deep frown.

"Be gone!" he commanded of the Bone-Men. "Be gone from this land!"

The Bone-Men laughed and jeered at the old king. Their entire bodies were thin grey skeletons, with two eyes of sickly yellow light. They held crude rusted swords and when they moved a sound of grating nails sent a shiver through the Guard of Atlantis.

"Merry-old-king-on-his-golden-throne," the Bone-Men sang. "Wise-old-king-grew-old-alone... Roses-white-and-red-will-protect-you-no-more, for-the-Shambling-Bone-Men-have-come-to-wage-war..."

"Be gone, I command," the king cried. Only half a dozen feet away a bolt of lightning struck the ground, blinding to the old king's eyes, and when it faded another three Bone-Men were left in its place. "You demons of the lightning be gone! You will spare my roses this night!"

"The-Master-dances-in-the-dark-places," the Bone-Men jeered as one, louder than even the thunderstorm. "Gardens-of-sickly-sores... Mean-old-king, you-will-defy-no-more..."

"We will attack, my king," the Captain of the Guard said grimly, yet his eyes were downcast. The Bone-Men were many thousands, with more and more in the lightning.

"Stay your spear, Captain," the king said. "For there is no more battle here."

And the old king was correct. For he knew the weakness of these Shambling Bone-Men, and why they had attacked his royal gardens. In his youth, before he was king, the old king had happened upon a weary magician alone at night aside the road to Atlantis. The magician was gravely ill, and the king offered him fire and food. The next morning, in full health, the magician granted the future-king one wish for his kindness.

"Well," said the future-king of Atlantis. "What does a man wish for?"

"Peace in his time," the magician replied, stroking his curled beard. "Roses while they last, a draught of Elysium spring water, or lordship over his domain."

"A man can wish for all of that?"

"In return for a promise, good sir, I will grant all of your heart's desires. You must promise not to dance in the darkness, and be gentle and kind to all you meet. The more just you are the greater the roses will grow, until one day when the night closes in and you must give up that which your heart has desired."

"I promise," the future-king said, for he lived his life much like that already.

The magician smiled. "That which you promise, you must perform."

And now the Shambling Bone-Men were here, and the promise would be fulfilled. It was the roses they feared, more than anything else. Yet the old king was deeply saddened, as he knew his poor gardens would never be the same.

"Fire-and-ice-and-rage, old-king, we-are-the-Bone-Men-of-the-lightning!"

The old king's silver sword was sharp, and he cut a heavy swath through the long stems of his old roses, rosy-red and limestone-white and sun-splashed-yellow and champagne-pink. With his free hand the king scooped up a dozen roses and threw them through the rain at the yellow-eyed Bone-Men.

The jeering and mocking song turned to cries of distress and fear as the roses struck the nearest Shambling Bone-Men and turned them to nothing but old dust. Old mucky dust and a pile of rusted old swords.

"The roses, Captain," the king said, the tears on his face hidden behind the rainfall. "Use the roses."

And so with the roses cut loose the wind of the great storm turned against the Shambling Bone-Men, and a flood of petals took to the air around the gardens and spread across the army of Bone-Men, scattering them all to dust.

In the morning the storm had passed, and the kingdom was saved. Yet the old king despaired before his roses, for they had all gone. He looked out from his tower at gardens of grey dust and lifeless storks, a briar patch of twisted thorns and weeds marked all that remained of the dark Shambling Bone-Men.

The king turned from his window with a heavy sigh, and was surprised to see standing before him the very same magician he had saved upon the road to Atlantis all the long years ago.

“That which you promised, you have performed,” the magician said. He looked no older, and his smile was no less for the passage of time.

“Yet my gardens, the heart and soul of my kingdom, are lost. I will not live long enough to see the roses return.”

“Despair not, old king, for that is why I have come.” The magician flourished his robes and offered to the king a small vial of crystal clear liquid. “A draught of Elysium spring water – enough to replenish your gardens. What more can a man wish for?”

“Nothing, kind sir,” the old king cried, overcome with happiness.

And so the wise, old, and gentle king spent the morning carefully placing drops of water amongst the ruined soil of his garden. By the time he was finished, the first roses had begun to grow, and the thorny briars disappeared.

In time, the roses of the Royal Gardens of Atlantis were larger and more beautiful than ever before, able to withstand the wrath of any storm. The old king spent his last years walking amongst the warmth of his gardens, and he lived happily ever after, to the end of his days...

The sky was a wash of navy-blue and star-speckled lights.

Fleur's voice faded away and I shook my head, as if disturbed from a dream. I was caught in a storm of my own, a storm of memories and glimpses of the future. I'd never heard this story before, and yet there were parallels between what it was about, and what I knew of the true Atlantis.

The Bone-Men, for one, sounded eerily like the demons that had torn the world apart all those millennia ago, and plunged the greatest nation to have ever existed into a very, very dark place. I had destroyed a creature of bone (of bone and shadow and fire) alongside Dumbledore just yesterday far beneath the streets of Rome. Were they one and the same?

How had I not heard this story before?

"What 'ave I told you about ze frowning, 'Arry?" Fleur said, closing the book of fairytales.

I blinked. "That was one of your favourite stories, huh?"

"*Oui*. It has a happy ending."

A happy ending, I thought. *There is no such thing*. Atlantis' real end was drowned in enough blood to sink the Titanic and flood a continent. "Well... fairytales are made of happy endings, aren't they?" I said softly, a touch bitterly.

"What else would you read to a child?" Fleur asked, bemused.

I shook my head. "Children... children are left to find out for themselves that there's no such thing as a happy ending, and most of them figure it out very quickly." I was the godforsaken voice of experience in that department. "Even Muggle children – *especially* Muggle children – know that dragons and demons are real." They live inside of us, and sometimes they win. "Fairytales exist to show children that the evil Dark Lord, the troll under the bridge, the demons and the dragons... can be killed."

Fleur was awkwardly silent for a moment. "They also exist to put children to sleep."

I half-laughed, half-sighed. "Yeah... I also don't think there are any roses in Atlantis these days..."

Fleur held my gaze. We were so close together on the sofa that I could see myself in her eyes. "Atlantis is just a fairytale, 'Arry. Yet you really believe you can find eet, don't you?"

"Oh yes," I said. "Do you believe me?"

Fleur shrugged. "Seeing iz believing. That iz what I believe. I also believe ze vegetables will need to come off ze heat now."

"It was a nice story," I said, as Fleur stood up. "Thank you for telling it to me."

She smiled. "You are welcome, 'Arry. Now come, we will 'ave guests soon, and ze proof of ze pudding iz in ze eating."

That which you promise, you must perform.

Oh I fucked myself up big time.

It was full dark when Fleur's guests arrived via the floo.

Fleur looked at me a touch apprehensively and offered me a nervous smile as we heard the fireplace roar into life from down the hallway. My hands were full draining the carrots and pasta into china serving dishes, as voices speaking fluent French and the odd bit of English arose from the living room, loud and full of good humour.

"*Dans ici!*" Fleur called down the hallway from the kitchen. *In here.*

"*Bonjour, Fleur!*" came the reply.

Now I had no memories of this dinner, of any of this at all, which meant it hadn't happened before, or that it had happened so many lifetimes ago that it was beyond recollection. I didn't like to think that, as I wasn't that certain how many lives I had lived and died, but it

couldn't have been that many, really... The trouble with trying to remember memories of another life was that those other lives had still happened to me. Most of the time with these memories I just had to hit and hope, and say what came to mind. It wasn't a flawless system – that was *for-fucking-sure*.

Anyway, I hadn't met Fleur's friends before – not so soon, only Day Three of my Harry Tries to Save the World remix – yet I was expecting elegance and beauty from the women, and undoubtedly three tall, dark, and handsome Frenchmen. So I wasn't disappointed when I turned out to be the shortest person of the evening.

Growth spurt. January. Set your watch by it.

"Hello Grace, Emilie," Fleur said, excited and smiling, as they exchanged kisses on their cheeks.

I vaguely recognised the two women – both brunettes, both extremely attractive (although absolutely nothing on Fleur) – from my fourth-year and the Tri-wizard Tournament. They were amongst the visiting Beauxbatons students, having graduated by now. The three blokes – handsome bastards that they were – I hadn't met before, of that I was sure.

"*C'est, Alain,*" Grace said, and Fleur graciously took one of the tall bloke's hands and kissed his cheeks. He was a little red in the cheeks after that and Grace looked mildly irritated, yet she shook it away.

"*Et c'est, Matthieu,*" Emilie said, and the second bloke got the same treatment as the first. Fleur hadn't kissed me on the cheek as I'd stumbled bleeding into her backyard that afternoon...

The three blokes were dressed much like I was, in fancy expensive suits, only they seemed to wear it better than I could. And the last bloke, tallest of the lot of them, didn't seem to have a partner... I was frowning again.

"*Sébastien,*" he said, his voice low as he leaned in to kiss Fleur's cheeks.

It may have been my imagination, but I thought he lingered a touch too long. I drained the rest of the damn carrots a little aggressively, slamming the bottom of the colander against the sink, breaking *Sébastien's* opening move and drawing everyone's attention to me.

Fleur took a step back from her guests and smiled at me as if she knew exactly what I'd done. It was nice to be noticed, and I saw flickers of recognition in the eyes of Grace and Emilie. Oh yes, I'm Harry Potter, ladies.

"Zis is, 'Arry," Fleur said, introducing me. "He is quite 'andy about ze kitchen, and if you find yourself without a wand, he iz also quite adept at sewing."

I laughed. Fleur was speaking English for my benefit, yet I understood the French just fine. "Nice to meet you all," I said. "Hope you're hungry. Fleur and I have been cooking all day."

"You look remarkably like..." Matthieu began, but paused.

"'Arry Potter," Grace said, glancing at Fleur for confirmation.

I saw the other two blokes – Alain and Sébastien – recognise the name. Sébastien's first look of dismissal, as if I were his *waiter* for the evening, flickered to something else – he was sizing me up.

"That's me."

"It iz... surprising to see you here," Emilie said into the silence, with a nervous little giggle.

"'Arry saved my life and 'ad my employment at Gringotts terminated only two days ago," Fleur said, with an enigmatic smile. She was enjoying this. "He is ze reason I am home."

"Well, ze English weather is far too sticky zis time of year," Emilie replied. "It iz good to see you home, Fleur, and meet you properly, 'Arry."

"And you."

“We brought a bottle of *Blanc de Noire* – *champagne verres*, Fleur?” Alain said, holding up a large bottle of expensive-looking champagne. “Would you like a drink, ‘Arry? Or is it juice for you tonight?”

I grinned. “I could drink any of you French lads under the table.”

Sébastien returned my grin, showing a lot of teeth. “If you are sure then... we don’t want you getting an upset stomach before bedtime.”

Dinner was served in the Delacour’s dining room, on a large mahogany dining table that could sit about twenty people, below chandeliers of fine sparkling crystal. Wizarding portraits adorned the walls and a warm fire crackled softly in the fireplace. Two large windows looked out upon the dark French countryside. There were few stars, and unexpected clouds obscuring the sky.

Fleur and I had spent a considerable amount of time preparing dinner – and her ability in the kitchen was first class. The salmon was swimming in mushrooms and dressing, and the vegetables and pasta, rice and salad, were all completed by a selection of exquisite sauces. There was the champagne too, as well as a few bottles of white and red wine. The whole scene was warm, warm and relaxing.

I felt out of place.

We were all seated at one end of the table, close to the fireplace and the windows. I sat next to Fleur with no one on my left, and around the head of the table sat Sébastien, Grace, Alain, Matthieu, and Emilie – all laughing and talking happily, slipping easily between French and English almost too fast for me to follow. It had really only been three days since I’d ‘learnt’ French, after all.

“I attend the *Supérieur de Magie* University,” Sébastien said, speaking to the group yet with his eyes on Fleur. “I am studying experimental portal creation under Madam Dabbón for the summer. Minister Chevalier personally recommended me to her elite academy.”

“That sounds intriguing,” Fleur replied, sipping her champagne.

“*Oui*, it is, *mon cherié*,” he replied, with a charming smile that I hope Fleur saw as an arrogant smirk. “Between Madam Dabbón and myself, we are close to a breakthrough that could one day replace the discomfort of floo travel and portkeys.”

“That’s neat,” I said. The salmon was great. I’d eaten more than anyone at the table, yet there was a lot of food, and I was still feeling a little weak from the exertions of the last few days. Funny thing was, I knew a little about portal magic. “I heard that the problem with creating a portal to step through is that it can’t really exist in two places at the same time.”

The knowledge in the *Magnus Fontis*, and moreover the knowledge of Lost Atlantis, had bestowed me with lifetimes worth of reading. Another funny thing – I have lifetimes. *Had* lifetimes. Of that I was not so sure anymore.

Sébastien frowned. “Yes, that iz a problem.” He cast an eye around the table. “Yet with temporal magic, space can be curved around a specific axis to... *open* a pathway between two points. In theory, that is – the spellwork and runes are nowhere near complete enough to test.”

“But what about Time,” I said, perhaps a little fast. “You have to account for Time on your *axis* or any traveller through your portals could arrive before they left – or worse, years *after* they stepped through.”

Sébastien scoffed. “You are a student of magical physics and limits, ‘Arry Potter? As well as relativity? I thought you were a schoolboy.”

“I am – and on weekends I hunt Dark Lords and slay dragons, mate.”

“And on weekdays you also thwart Dark wizard attacks,” Fleur said, offering me a stunning smile.

“From what I can follow, ‘Arry makes a fair point, Sébastien,” Alain said, rubbing the coarse stubble on his cheeks and leaning back in his chair. “I do not pretend to know much about this, but time would present a problem, would eet not?”

"Time always presents a problem..." I muttered. Fleur heard me, her brow furrowing.

Sébastien was looking a little flustered, perhaps being pushed out of his depth. "Hypothetically, time could be suspended within the axis... that would negate any detrimental effects... *hypothetically*."

"How can you kill time without wounding eternity?" I asked. "I reckon you'd just end up back where you started."

"Well, should you solve these problems, 'Arry, be sure to let me know," Sébastien cut me off there, draining his champagne flute and reaching for the bottle.

I nodded, his words bringing up swirling, fuzzy memories. I didn't think the problems could be solved. The time-travel I did back to the beginning was technically through a portal – a portal for my immortal soul – and that suspended time for, at a maximum, eight years. I could die right now and, without any say in the matter, I would wake up three days ago to such pain that it might very well break my mind. And eight years from now that would happen anyway so long as Voldemort was alive – in any way, shape, or form.

Tap-tap-tap-tap... It had begun to rain, heavy drops striking the large windows, which was odd for this time of year. It was pitch-black outside, not even any stars peeking through the clouds, yet this was the countryside – there were not many streetlamps.

"And how are you spending your summer, 'Arry?" Grace asked, a little shyly. "Are you in France for long?"

"No, not long," I replied. I felt a little off – like the salmon wasn't agreeing with me.

How was I spending my summer? Geez, where to begin... Find Atlantis, battle Voldemort for control of the greatest source of power in the world, and keep everyone alive for the grand finale that, if everything fell into place and there were no more *divine* or *demonic* interruptions, would take place just on or before the new school year began.

“I’ll bother Fleur until she kicks me out. My back-up summer plan is to not get dead.”

Fleur laughed. The strap of her dress slipped from her shoulder again, and even Emilie and Grace’s eyes were drawn to that curve of bare flesh. “You are very unpredictable, ‘Arry,” she said.

“Ah, well, that keeps all those Dark wizards on their toes, doesn’t it?”

But not goddesses or demons, it seems, I thought. Saturnia, whatever she truly was – something different, something new – was a step or two ahead of me so far. And the fact that she had my blood only added to the worries I wore like a death sentence.

After dinner, we moved into the cosy living room opposite the dining room with another large warm fire. Fleur and her friends were talking quickly and happily in French about their years at Beauxbatons, and the three French blokes were discussing the local Quidditch League, of which I knew nothing. I was in an armchair off to the side, saying little and thinking of tomorrow, of the future I had to get back to shaping.

I knew I had delayed here at Fleur’s too long. There was work to be done – wars to be fought. Yet as I watched her with her friends, her eyes alight and lips smiling, her slender hands folded on her lap, I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else. Was that stupid? Selfish? It was both – and for reasons that could unmake the world.

Still...

The rain was really coming down hard, slamming into the windows in fat, heavy drops. I felt a rush of unease at the wildness of it. It was low and steady, but streams of wind were howling around the house. There was nothing but darkness beyond the windows. I saw Fleur looking out and frowning more than once at the storm.

“This weather is unexpected,” Matthieu said. “*Eet* is really coming down out there.”

I had a thought. “I’ll just be a minute,” I said, standing up and heading out of the room.

I moved quickly down the hallway and into the kitchen. There was a fair amount of mess from the day's cooking and the smell of juicy mushrooms still hung in the air. I stepped over to the back door and flung it open against the storm. As I did, a clap of thunder shook the heavens and a flash of lightning absorbed the darkness. Rain splattered into the kitchen against me and a drenched owl came flying in from outside.

Hedwig landed on my shoulder and began to shake herself dry as I closed the back door against the furious elements.

"See, I didn't forget about you, did I?" I asked her. Her amber-eyes flashed in the soft light, and she nipped my ear – affectionately, gratefully. "Good girl, Hedwig." I headed back to the living room.

"I thought that was where you'd got to," Fleur said, upon my return.

Hedwig was drying herself on my shoulder, using my jacket and the side of my head. "Hope you don't mind I brought her inside."

"Not at all, 'Arry."

"Aw, she iz beautiful," Emilie exclaimed. "I keep meaning to buy an owl – a lovely one like that."

Hedwig hooted contently, shaking her feathers, as a second and much louder – *much closer* – clap of thunder shook the windows in their frames. Grace jumped, startled, and raised a hand to her chest. A flash of lightning tore down through the sky, highlighting the world beyond the large windows in a blanket of blue light.

My feeling of unease hadn't gone away. If anything...

Behind Fleur on a thin table of old sandy wood, next to an empty clear vase, was a radio-box, a Wizarding Wireless, with a bronze gramophone firmly attached. It crackled to life in a *buzz* of static.

"Oh, some of ze energy in that last strike must have come down through ze house," Sébastien said, looking up at the ceiling. His fists were clenched hard against the arms of his chair.

"No I don't think so," I said, staring at the gramophone – it was pointed toward me like the widened maw of some dark beast. The crackling static began to sound like throaty laughter.

"Iz that music?" Grace asked, tilting her head to the side.

"I don't hear—" I began, but fell short.

"Hey Jude, don't make it bad... take a sad song... and make it better – remember, to let her into your heart, then you can start, to make it better..."

Thunder crashed again in what felt like the next room, the crystals dangling in the chandeliers clanging together.

"Aw hell," I said, listening to the Wireless. The wound in my side seemed to throb with the rhythm of the words.

"Arry, what is the matter?" Fleur said, standing up. "You look unwell..."

Too long, I thought. *I shouldn't have spent the day here*. Hedwig squawked in what could have been dismay.

"So let it out, and let it in, hey Harry, begin, you're waiting for someone to perform with... And don't you know that's its just you, hey Harry, you'll do..."

I blinked. "Did that thing just *sing* my name?"

"It did, *oui*," Alain said, looking disturbed. "I heard it."

"As did I," Fleur said. She looked unnerved herself now. "Arry, what iz 'appening?"

A bolt of lightning lit up Fleur's front garden so brightly that it had to have struck the ground nearby, or right on top of the house if not closer. The eerie blue light took more than a few seconds to fade. I frowned – that wasn't right.

I met Fleur's gaze. "I'm sorry, Fleur, I'm so sorry."

I turned and ran from the room, heading for the front door. I didn't wait to see if any one was following me. Out in the hallway I tried to shake Hedwig from my shoulder, but she dug her claws in tight and refused to be budged. I smiled grimly. "You're looking out for me then?" I asked her as we reached the front door.

Hedwig, possibly the most intelligent owl in the whole damn world, hooted agreement, and I grasped the ornate brass handle of the door and pushed the lock, throwing the door open inwards.

A gust of wind knocked me back a step and ruffled Hedwig's feathers. However fierce the storm had been just minutes ago when I'd opened the back door, it was worse now. Rain lashed in through the door against me hard enough to sting, and blew the hem of my jacket up and around my back. I raised my arm to protect my face and stepped out into the night.

The first thing I noticed was that there was a strange – *foul* – smell on the air. It was familiar, but I couldn't place it. Either way, it made me feel as if all at once I wasn't alone in the darkness of Fleur's garden.

That's not a nice feeling to have... not on a night like this.

Thunder shook both the skies and the earth, and the rain clouds overhead were pulsating with blue light – lightning within the storm. I felt very small against the power I could feel up in the sky, and yet I was Harry-*fucking*-Potter. Whatever was happening, I was up for the challenge.

A good gust of wind nearly knocked me down, but I rolled with it, breathing in more of that awful smell. It hit me. *Sulphur*, I thought. *That's what I can smell. Bloody sulphur!*

Sulphur was bad news. Sulphur was demonic. It was far too early in the summer for demons wreathed in the fires of Hell to be walking the world. No, that came later, after Atlantis. So who, *what*, had changed the rules again...?

A flash of lightning tore down through the sky and struck the ground just metres away – and stayed there. I took a reflexive step back, a grin of amazement on my face, as a sizzling column of electric-blue

energy dug a trough into the rain-soaked grass. All at once I wanted to be closer to it, to the mile-high column of lightning that cast the garden in pale light.

Hedwig was screeching into my ear but I couldn't really hear her – not well enough to care.

It was strangely beautiful, and *hot*. I could feel the heat like a blast of desert air. I reached out my hand towards the dazzling light, the power sparking at my fingertips. I wanted to touch it, to be a part of this raw energy—

“Are you insane, ‘Arry!” Fleur cried, grasping my wrist and pulling my arm away. *“Zat will kill you or worse!”*

Insane? Oh, I had to be by now, didn't I? But *goddamn*, Fleur looked good in the rain, her hair wet and her dress damp against her skin.

A second bolt of lightning joined the first, boring a hole into the ground and pooling clear blue power into its base. Fleur pulled me another few steps back, the thick forks of lightning very hot, and the smell of that fiery sulphur nauseating.

“‘Arry, what iz...?” she began, taking a step behind me as a third and equally powerful bolt of fiery blue force struck the earth just an arm's length away, loud enough to wake the dead.

My wand was clenched firmly in my right hand. I didn't remember drawing it. “Do you believe in Shambling Bone-Men, Fleur?” It was a funny question – the stench of sulphur was overpowering, acrid and harsh – a *fucking hilarious* question, but an important one.

“‘Arry...” Fleur grasped my upper arm.

I began to laugh, and above the thunder, I roared, “Because I think they believe in *us*!”

A/N: *There you have it - updates should be more regular now I've got a bit more time. Hope you enjoyed this chapter - I reckon Harry is*

more than a little insane, and we haven't even got to the best parts of this tale yet. So, as always, did I do good? Let me know in a quick review.

Yeah, I did good. Right?

--Joe

Chapter 10 – Dear Atlantis

Part One – The Gambler

*On a warm summers evenin', on a train bound for nowhere,
I met up with the Gambler - we were both too tired to sleep.
So we took our turns a'starin' out the window at the darkness
Til boredom overtook us, and he began to speak...*

--Kenny Rogers

A blazing *scream* of thunder punctuated my words, cutting my laughter short. The very sky vociferated its defiance against me, as the three bolts of untamed lightning gouged the earth and cast back the darkness under a pall of electric-blue light.

"Bone-Men," I heard Fleur whisper, grasping my arm hard enough to stop the circulation. "*Merde*, surely not..."

"Can't you smell it?" I asked. We were both soaked through by the lashings of rain. If not for the lightning, we wouldn't have been able to see a damn thing. "The sulphur? Can't you *feel* it? In the lightning? *Up there?*" I threw my arm up, my wand pointed towards the heavens. "Something *wicked* this way comes..."

"I... I can smell eet." Fleur looked at me as if I were someone she no longer recognised. As if she were holding onto a stranger. I knew the look on her face better than most – it was fear. Fear for herself, her own life, and fear for me, fear *of* me. "Arry, I'm scared."

And yet she hadn't turned to flee – no, not Fleur. This was a woman who could, if the need called for it, battle dragons. A Champion by any measure, goblet of fire or no. And that gosh-darn summer dress, wet against her gorgeous body, made me feel a whole lot of things – scared wasn't amongst those feelings.

"Me too," I lied. Scared? I was fucking excited. This was something new – the lightning, anyway. That sulphuric stink was all too familiar. "Scared is okay. Don't worry, I got this." Behind Fleur, standing in the light of the doorway, were her friends – Emilie, Grace, Matthieu, Alain, and pretty-boy Sébastien – all of them clutching wands.

Hedwig *screeched* in my ear and reared backwards on my shoulder, her wing flapping against the side of my head. I snapped my neck around fast in time to see the three bolts of lightning fuse into one thick column of sizzling energy as wide as the archaic oak trees that stood silhouetted against the night, bordering the Delacour's château.

"Fleur, what iz 'appenning? Magie noire! Get away from it!" A cry from the house that was almost lost in the howling wind.

My hand twitched around my wand. I was itching to unleash some chaotic spells, a few lances of power. Ready to shake the world. "Hey Harry, don't let me down..." I hummed at the lightning. "And don't you know... that it's just you... Hey Harry, you'll do..."

Something was riding the lightning down from the heart of the storm. A bulge in the thick column of energy a mile-high was falling – falling and falling and gaining speed. I felt Fleur tugging my arm, and I allowed myself to be pulled back into the square of light that flooded the garden from her open front door.

A blood-chilling scream broke through the wind, and the rain, and the thunder. It was, without being overly dramatic, a scream not of this world. It was the sound of a thousand cracked nails on a thousand dusty chalkboards, a million bones snapping and snapping over and over, the cry of a tortured soul writhing within bonds of pure, raw anguish. A scream that belonged to a very dark hell.

"Well..." I said, for lack of anything witty or clever to say. "Well."

"Is eet... 'Arry, is Voldemort doing this?"

I blinked. "You said his name – that's good. And here I was thinking living in England had made you soft." Fleur glared at me. "Yeah, in a way, if this is what I think it is – sulphur's a dead giveaway – then this is Voldemort's doing by default."

The bulge in the lightning slammed into the ground a stone's throw away, sending a swift tremor through the garden and almost knocking Fleur and myself from our feet. Almost on cue the rain stopped – as if some heavenly tap had been tautened tight, and an eerie silence followed the loss of the downpour. The beam of mile-high lightning

remained, however, as did the low rumbling of thunder up overhead in the roiling clouds.

“Madness...” Fleur whispered. Out of the corner of my eye I saw her looking up into the sky, no doubt wondering at the abrupt halt in the freak summer storm.

My eyes were on the lightning, on the deep trough in the middle of the garden path. The high-electric-blue light was fading into something else... I took an unconscious step to the left, placing myself between Fleur and the throbbing pulse of darker light at the base of the lightning.

With the wind having died down to nothing, the stink of the sulphur grew oppressive and stagnant. I raised my free hand before my face, fruitlessly trying to waft the fiery tang away. It felt like time was up.

“Here we go...” I whispered, fighting the urge to giggle. I felt my right eye twitching a little. “Gonna be ugly,” I said. “Three galleons says it’s as ugly as sin.”

“Arry...”

From within the lightning-soaked trench, a long and jagged arm of painfully-white bone punched through the curtain of lightning and dug five razor-sharp talons into the moist earth.

Behind Fleur and I came a joint cry of shock and surprise from her friends. I paid them no mind, as whatever had fallen from the stormy sky clawed its way out of the lightning like a heaving corpse rising from the grave. It was something monstrous, I gathered that much, as the skeletal arm became sharp points of silvery shoulder bone, and an elongated, misshapen muzzle riddled with fangs and dead flesh poked out from behind the crackling curtain of energy.

Fleur’s grip on my upper arm went limp. “Th-three galleons...” she muttered.

“Easy money.” I sighed – oh how I sighed.

What emerged from the lightning was impossible.

What emerged from the lightning was something so foreign, something so... so *negative*, that my first and only real thought was one of revulsion. I felt the same wave of nauseous distaste shiver through Fleur, as we beheld something that did not belong to this world. Something that belonged to *elsewhere* – and *long ago*.

Something impossible.

From the dark fires of what may as well be called Hell emerged ten-feet of white and silver bone, ancient joints spinning and cracking like the tumbling of a million dice and dead-eyes spinning in the dull yellow flame of the inferno. The Bone-Man rose to its full height and pierced the false-quiet of the night with that screech of *elsewhere* and *long ago*.

"Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate," I said, lapsing into traditional Italian. *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here...*

Now I knew darkness – better than most – I knew *dark creatures*. I knew the cruelty in the hearts of men. I knew Dementors, Werewolves, Vampires, Basilisks, and a hundred other things that could drain a soul, shred humanity, tear away flesh... yet all of these monsters *belonged*. They fit to the world – they were a part of life, and more often than not, death. However horrendous and needlessly cruel the dark of my world could be, it was, right at the heart of the matter, *fucking necessary*.

This skeletal horror didn't belong to the world. This was pretty *un-fucking-necessary*. Its every movement, its very form – from the way it tilted its head to the way the bones heaved as if it were breathing – didn't quite fit with the natural order of things. It *wasn't* natural – it almost hurt the eye to behold. Calling it a fish out of water wouldn't be too far from the mark, yet that made it sound almost harmless, and this thing was anything but harmless.

It belonged to the same scourge of nightmare that had been imprisoned deep beneath Rome in the *Magnus Fontis*. The demon of shadow and bone that I'd exploded alongside with Dumbledore barely a day ago, that had been guarding the hidden path to Atlantis. Creatures that had burnt the old world to so much dust and ash in the wind...

“Arry...” Fleur’s voice was a whisper, throaty and dry. “Why is eet looking at me?”

I blinked. Fleur was right. Its fetid eyes weren’t appraising me at all – but her. I didn’t like that one bit. That nearly didn’t fit as much as the creature itself. “Stay close,” I said, and my voice was deadly serious, brooking absolutely zero-argument. “No sudden movements now...”

“What iz eet? *Merde*, where does eet come from?”

I didn’t honestly know *where* these creatures came from. My memories were hazy, always hazy – it was far too early in the summer for this – and I felt out of my depth. I knew for certain, without a shadow of a doubt, that they detested this world as much as I inherently detested theirs. It came right down to simple perception – nothing more – humanity and the Bone-Men (for lack of their true name) were inexorably repelled.

Because it was impossible. Because it did not belong.

Rain water dripped from the tip of my wand as I slowly raised my arm. The Bone-Man snarled low in a throat it didn’t possess and crouched down on its haunches, those tumbling-dice joints cracking as if rusted from disuse. Its dead yellow eyes swivelled to me, and I felt a vague concern that it sensed my intentions.

Memories of forever and of lives long ago *raged* through my mind. An almost incomprehensible blur of times to come, of times forgotten, that *hurt*. “It’s because it has no soul,” I said, all of a sudden, as a memory clicked into place.

Fleur was close enough now that I felt her breath on my neck as she spoke. “No... soul?”

I nodded, struggling to suppress the warm shiver that Fleur’s close-proximity sent through me. This was neither the time nor the place for that, curse my fucking luck. “What happens next probably won’t follow the rules as we know them, Fleur...”

“Rules?”

“Of life, of death, and all that’s in between.” Now *that* sounded overly dramatic. I flexed my wrist, spinning a slow circle with my wand. “I’m gonna have to pound this bastard until he breaks...”

With a roar that had broken the world a very long time ago, the Bone-Man shambled forward – fast and sure, silver talons shining with what remained of the fading blue beam of unnatural lightning – murder and chaos in its fiery eye sockets.

I charged forward, too, away from Fleur, the tip of my wand already aglow, bellowing a roar of my own, as Hedwig took flight from my shoulder.

It was game on.

“*Arry!*” Fleur screamed, making a grab to stop me.

Too late. I was going head-to-head with this tall impossibility. I probably looked pretty fucking cool...

Well, *maybe yes... maybe no...* If I didn’t get my arse kicked.

I had the home-world advantage, at least.

The odds are stacked pretty high against me.

But you know what?

Fuck the odds.

“*INCENDIOS GRATA!*”

A raw blast of magical-fire exploded from the tip of my wand and struck the hide of blazing silver coating the Bone-Man. Thick tendrils of super-hot flame erupted across the demon’s skeletal chest, and knocked it back a step in its charge. Yet it recovered faster than a heartbeat, and kept on coming. I wasn’t overly worried – I’d expected its resistance to *normal* magic, at the very least.

These bastard things were just full of tricks.

Between Fleur's cries and the low, deep rumbling of thunder overhead, I had time for one more quick spell and I brandished my wand up above my head and cried against the nightmare, "*REDAREXIA!*" and brought my wand cutting down in a vicious swipe through the air.

A crescent of dark blue light claimed the space between me and the Bone-Man, just as it came within arm's reach. The spell struck the monster high across its shoulders with a blow of extreme force – and sent its momentum spinning off-course to the right, out of mine and, more importantly, Fleur's path.

I wasn't quick enough to dodge its flailing arms, however – and the thick tip of one of its razor-sharp talons caught me just above my left ear and sent me to the ground hard, snapping my glasses right off and opening up a fair gash across the side of my head. Warm blood, sticky and fresh, flowed down over my ear and down my neck. I felt sharp disapproval from beneath my shirt and bandages. Across my side, my stitched-up stab wound threatened to break open anew.

"*ARRY!*"

Fleur?

My vision was blurred without my glasses, yet I could see well enough that the Bone-Man had righted itself and was shambling towards Fleur, its gargantuan arms swinging back and forth. She was backing up quickly, her wand raised before her, a spell on the tip of her tongue.

"*Verivelas!*" Fleur cried.

Oh, Fleur, a confounding jinx? I had to remind myself that the gorgeous French witch had no idea what she was facing. Needless to say, the pulse of sickly yellow light that struck the demon didn't slow it in the slightest. How could you confuse a mind that didn't comprehend the world to start with? You couldn't – but you could piss it off trying.

“Fleur, get down!”

The Bone-Man swung at her with a snarl of inhuman, animalistic rage, yet Fleur dropped to the ground, narrowly avoiding being torn in half. Undeterred and utterly mindless in its desire to harm, the Bone-Man raised a clawed-leg to pierce Fleur where she had fallen.

I saw red – red-raw anger – and spun about in the muddy grass, looking for all the world like I knew what I was doing.

Through necessity I had faced and destroyed *armies* of these creatures – creatures of the Old World wars – but never this early in my life had one been released into the world, to wreak what havoc it may. And for some reason this thing, that rode the lightning, had targeted Fleur Delacour. Trying to kill me was one thing, trying to kill her...

I saw *fucking* red – and in the space between one moment and the next, I channelled my rage into a cool tempered resolve, I fed my anger into hate for the Bone-Man, and spun about in the muddy grass, wand at the ready, *knowing* for all the world what I was doing.

“INCEDIOS GRATA!” Fire-magic was the only mainstream magic that worked with any real effect against these demons of undead-bone. With its leg raised to crush Fleur my blast of hot fire exploded with enough force to knock the Bone-Man off balance and send it tumbling into the ground.

The earth shook as it hit the grass and I set to work quickly in the precious few seconds I had. My arm seemed to act of its own accord as memories surfaced in my mind of past lives, future lives, and I plunged the tip of my wand into the soggy earth, beginning to chant and mutter under my breath words I had never honestly spoken before now.

“Vixis...btlar...gzwer...sargra...” My wand cut through the grass and dirt as if it were a hot knife through butter. I slashed down, left, back up and across, drawing a complex network of lines – a rune.

Old Magic. Magic that *shook* the air, that felt like something awakening after a very, very long time asleep.

Magic that little Harry Potter, fifteen-nearly-sixteen, shouldn't have known a damn thing about.

"*Ctholy...Swy...farsyp...vrat!*" I was whispering words as they came to me – nonsense words, words of no meaning – words of a language so ancient that it had long since passed from the world. Beyond incantations of Latin and forgotten Latium, I spoke the language of the greatest sorcerers to have ever lived and breathed – the Atlantians.

The shallow grooves I dug into the earth suddenly flared with white liquid-light that flowed from my wand. The rune came to life and a beam of energy burst into existence, screaming through the air towards the snarling, *shrieking* Bone-Man.

One of Fleur's friends – Grace – had rushed out into the garden and was helping Fleur gain her feet as the Bone-Man screeched and writhed, trying to right itself even as its weight sunk down into the sloshy, muddy ground. My blast of fiery magic had left a big black scorch mark across its chest and shoulders, and my shiny beam of energy from the rune in the dirt *slammed* into the creature and wrapped itself around its thin, horrifying neck – tighter than a noose.

The Bone-Man roared, the unholy sound of another world, and forgot all about Fleur as it writhed and flailed on the ground. Its pointed, misshapen muzzle of seared flesh regarded me now below two solid eyes of furious yellow flame. It had taken me seriously.

"That's right, big fella," I said, chuckling as I rose back to my feet. "If you can get out of this then you deserve to kick my arse."

I wasn't entirely sure what I had done, but the beam of heavy white energy emanating from the rune carved into the wet earth had bound the Bone-Man in place. It couldn't do more than squirm and scream.

Which was good, because I needed a breather after that blow to the head.

My head hurt – and not only because of the new cool gash above my ear that had coated the left side of my face in blood. No, it was deeper than that. It felt as if my memories were on fire... burning and

burning. I'd had to pull some pretty heavy shit to the forefront of my mind, a mind that just couldn't handle the pressure yet, in order to inscribe and activate the old magic, the binding rune.

Fuck, but I needed a bottle of painkillers. At least I'd put my constant headache to good-freakin'-use... It took a monumental effort not to fall to my knees, and I was panting as if I'd run a marathon. I couldn't draw a deep breath for fear of disturbing my stitches anymore than I had already during that bitch-slap to the ground.

"Are you okay, Fleur?" I stepped back away from the Bone-Man and into the flood of light around Fleur's front door, where she and her friends were gathered – wide-eyed and incredulous.

"Am I okay?" Fleur glared at me. "You are bleeding, 'Arry." Her dress was still damp against her body, and her bare legs and shoulders were coated in slicks of mud and blades of grass from where she had fallen. Her eyes were narrow and *alive* with astonishment. She looked flawless, stunning... diamonds in the sun.

"I'm fi—"

The Bone-Man *roared* to wake the gods and the stained-glass panes on either side of Fleur's front door shattered. The door itself trembled in its frame as the demon slammed its arms down into the earth, pulling and wrenching against the thick beam of energy that held it in place.

"*Shut... UP!*" I shouted, turning on the spot and pulling my wand across my body. The shaft of light binding the creature followed my wand movements and it hit the mud, screeching in distress and what was probably fury. I turned back to Fleur. "As I was saying, I'm fine. It's ju—"

"Just a scratch? Shall I fetch ze needle and thread?"

I laughed.

"What *iz* that thing, Potter? Sébastien spat. He was sweating quite a bit, pale and shaking.

I tilted my bloodied face to meet his eyes – something in my gaze made him take a step back and rethink his tone. I could see him just fine this close without my glasses, being farsighted, and he was frightened. “Follow me, if you dare,” I said softly to the group, stifling a chuckle, and stepped back out into the garden.

I walked to just within reach of the Bone-Man, my upper lip pulled back in a feral-looking snarl, daring it to strike me down. The beam of thick lightning it had ridden down to earth had faded to almost nothing. All that remained was a thin transparent curtain in a wide crescent ditch, pooling with muddy rain water.

As expected, the Bone-Man shambled forward on the half-inch of slack it had over the noose and took a swipe at me. I calmly stepped back, just out of its reach, and five razor-sharp talons of blazing silver tore through the air where my face had been a breath ago.

“You weren’t left behind after the wars, were you?” I said, kneeling down on my haunches. “Ah, no... that sulphur is too strong, too new. You’re fresh from Hell.” I threw back my head and laughed at the clearing sky. The clouds of the freak storm were dissipating – starlight, distant and cold, peeked through the gaps in the canopy.

“Arry...” Fleur was close by, just behind me. Emilie, Matthieu, Grace and Alain flanking her, with Sébastien hanging back near the front door.

“It’s okay,” I said, over the deep, constant growling that emanated from between the distorted jaws of the beast. “It can’t break free.”

“Why iz eet still staring at me?” Fleur said, her voice harsh. “*Les yeux sont terribles...*”

That was a good question. I clapped my hands together, drawing the Bone-Man’s attention back to me. “Can you speak?” I asked it, tilting my head back and forth. “Some of your kind can, some can’t... you’re just a foot soldier, aren’t you?” I paused. “Answer mel”

The Bone-Man shrieked, opening its hideous maw wide as if to swallow the whole world, and tore against the binding holding it in place. “*Xéápq rá ázlí’ssui... béná’ilá... tú’lá...*”

A vicious lance of pain pierced my mind and seemed to burrow deep into my skull and *soul*, as the demon uttered incomprehensible words from within the black gaping hole at the back of its widened throat. The words vibrated in the air, and an oppressive darkness absorbed what little light there was from the house and stars. I retched, and the salmon from earlier in the evening nearly made an encore reappearance. Behind me, Fleur and the others suffered similar reactions.

“Okay.” I gritted my teeth as the darkness was lifted. “You speak that language again and I’ll destroy you – is that clear? Do you understand me? Read my eyes, you son of a bitch.”

“What was that, ‘Arry?”

I stood up and took a few steps back to stand next to Fleur. How to explain? “Well, that was Hellspeak. Um... demonic language, tongue of the devil, pit-chatter.” I ran a hand back through my matted hair. “There’s no understanding this thing, Fleur, not really...”

“But *what is eet?*”

“The enemy,” I said, quite calmly and simply. “The original enemy. This thing is older than magic as we know it – that’s why your spell didn’t faze it, why no magic wielded by wizard’s today can harm it, save fire – and only just at that. It’s immune, resistant, to our young and carefree way of slinging spells. This thing was around before we tamed magic, before we *civilised* it.”

“So what ‘ave you done? Why does *your* magic hold it?”

Because my kung fu is old school. Because I’ve died countless times, before and after reaching fabled lost Atlantis, because I’ve picked up a few tricks here and there, fought these creatures before... “I bound it with ancient runes. *Really* ancient runes. It’ll hold for a good while...”

Fleur wasn’t convinced. “But how did you know...?”

I shrugged, playing it as innocently as I could. “These creatures aren’t new – there are records of them across the whole world...”

Dumbledore and I destroyed something similar to this in the catacombs beneath Rome just over a day ago – we used dragon’s fire. Dragons are creatures of the Old World. Their flame packs the right kind of punch.” I paused, weighing up how much more to say. “And about six hundred years ago, according to legend, Merlin himself encountered something much like this – bone and shadow and sulphur – in a place known as Avalon. He destroyed it, but not before it destroyed a nation-city and plunged England and most of Europe into some very dark decades.”

“*Merde...*” Emilie whispered.

Fleur was biting her bottom lip, and it was a long moment before anyone spoke above that constant deep grumbling from the Bone-Man. “This iz impossible,” Fleur finally said. “And you ‘ave ruined another perfectly good suit, ‘Arry.”

I grinned. “It’s just a little mud and blood – scrub right out.”

“That cut on your head needs looking at,” Alain said.

“It’ll keep.” I waved him away. “More pressing matters... Fleur, this wasn’t a coincidence – that story you read to me, about Atlantis and Shambling Bone-Men, someone else overheard you...” *Something else...*

For a moment Fleur looked terrified – of me, of my words and my implications – but she masked it well. Champion – anyone’s measure. “But who?”

“I have my suspicions...” Beautiful, scantily-clad in a red dress, suspicions. Suspicions that had stabbed me and kissed me in the same moment. “Question is now though, how to dispose of this chap here... any suggestions?”

There was a heavy silence until Fleur found some words, “You seem to know what you are doing...” Her tone was uncertain and hesitant – afraid.

Was it my imagination, or was she standing just a little further away from me than she had been all day?

“That I do, but teamwork is important... No matter.” I leant back down on my knees in front of the twisted pile of screeching bone and flesh and yellow fire, making sure it could see my eyes. “I can’t understand you, but can you understand me? Growl once for yes, two for no...”

The Bone-Man’s malformed muzzle snapped forward, disturbing nothing but the air before my face. A wave of pungent sulphur washed over me, but I didn’t flinch. I waited a moment for it to finish snapping...

“Whoever sent you here sent you here to die,” I continued, as if discussing the matter over dinner. I chuckled – my head was killing me – and my ear was a little clogged with blood – but I had won – and in this game, winning was what mattered. “Are they watching right now, I wonder? As you struggle?” The mirth fled from my eyes as if it had never been, and what remained was not friendly. “This is *my* world, *my* time. You understand, don’t you? The boundary between my world and yours may be in flux for now, but you have no right to be here.”

I could still sense the others behind me, but they had moved back. None of them said a word, not even Fleur. I couldn’t blame them. They were seeing Harry Potter now, and not just Harry. Just Harry laughed and joked over dinner, whereas Harry Potter – the Boy Who Lived, the Time Warrior – battled would-be-gods and demons, Dark Lords and Death Eaters, Dementors and Dragons... without mercy.

The Bone-Man understood me – well enough, anyway. The set of my eyes, the tone of my words.... Oh, it understood just fine.

“And when I tear Voldemort from the battle-strewn nightmare of Atlantis, stop the damage he’s doing, and send your gateway into this world howling *back* into the abyss...” I paused and laughed, dipping my hand into a muddy puddle at my feet, and used the dampness to dig the blood out of my ear. Ugh, it was all squelchy... “I’ll be coming for the one that set you loose early – the one that gave you that little extra push to break through to *my* world and *my* time so soon, and so poetically-timed... No one, *fucking no one*, gets to use Time against me like this!”

I rose to my feet, brandishing my wand up at the night sky. “D’you hear me, demon-bitch? Oh, Saaa-turnnnn-iiiaaa!” My voice seemed to echo for miles across the countryside surrounding the Delacour’s château. Even the Bone-Man had fallen silent, its smouldering yellow eyes beholding me with wary, mindless chaos.

A whisper reached me from the front door, and the inviting warm light pouring over the threshold, “He’s mad...” Sébastien said.

Mad? Insane? Crazy? No doubt – but there was insane and then there was insane. I was the *right* kind of insane. I had to be to do what I did. And the longer I did it the crazier I got, and then I usually died and hurtled back in time to a few days ago. That hurt like all hell, and was probably scrambling more brain cells every time it happened.

Was I insane? Does it matter? Probably – but I enjoy it. I suppose that is quite terrible.

“Not answering me, huh?” I said to the stars. It really was a clear night now that the storm clouds had dissolved as quickly as they had arrived. It was warm again, a perfect summer’s evening, with a million million pinpricks of ethereal light twinkling away overhead. “Then watch me work...”

“Arry, who are you shouting at?” Fleur had stepped back into the garden, halfway between her friends and me – and the Bone-Man. “We need to call ze Aurors or someone to get rid of this creature...”

I regarded her with the relatively blood-free half of my face. “Nah I told you I got this.”

Fleur stamped her foot into the mud. “’Arry...” She was exasperated. “What *iz* ‘appening? You seem different – *frightening*. Where *iz* ze charming boy who saved my life in Diagon Alley?”

I shrugged. “I’m still here,” I said, with a small frown. All of a sudden I felt like I was coming down off a high. All of a sudden... everything wasn’t so funny anymore. Had I been laughing at the sky? “I just... I just can’t be showing any mercy right now. Not to this *thing*.”

“You’ve got eet trapped, no? We can ‘ave ze Ministry come and take eet away.”

I was shaking my head before she’d finished speaking. “Can’t do it – without a doubt, people will die. In their *thousands*. You can *feel* how wrong this thing is, can’t you? Right through your soul?” I waved at the pile of writhing bones and rotten flesh with my wand. The creature had been strangely silent for a few minutes now... the silence was more disturbing than it’s throatless growl. “I have to put it out of our misery.”

“You mean kill eet?”

“Is that a problem?”

Fleur thought about her answer, buying herself time by pushing her damp hair back over her shoulders, exposing a fair amount of pale creamy skin across her shoulders and neck. “No... that’s not a fair question to ask me.”

I nodded. “All it knows how to do is destroy – to kill, Fleur. That’s its function, as normal to it as breathing is to us.” I paused, choosing my words carefully. “And I don’t think it was sent here after me...”

“But then...” Fleur shivered. “*Non*, why? Can you get rid of eet at all?”

“Oh yeah, with ease.” I began to walk away from Fleur and the Bone-Man, across the garden and towards the low wall and hedge that surrounded the property. Before me loomed one of the massive oak trees that bordered the property on two sides – its dense canopy casting a dark silhouette against the night.

I appraised the mighty tree for a moment, in the gentle glow of my rune-magic and the lights from the house and stars overhead. It was a sturdy looking thing, several hundred years old, with a thick trunk about two metres in circumference. I estimated the height at about fifty feet – a fair size, and the crown spread out in a complex tangle of branches and slick leaves for about sixty feet.

“Oh you’ll do,” I whispered, raising my wand towards the intertwining branches high up near the far end of the trunk. “*Lacero!*” I flicked my wrist and sent my wand tip across the length of the tree.

A curved beam of crimson light burst from my wand and shot up toward the top of the tree, striking it on a forty-five or so degree angle. It struck the trunk just below the main canopy and *tore* into the old wood. The tree emitted a low groan as my spell ate through it faster than any chainsaw, severing the top of the tree in its entirety.

I stood watching the red light fade for a moment as it burrowed out of the other side, and almost missed the half a tonne of wood and leaves that slid cleanly from the trunk and fell toward me.

“Ooh, shit... *Wingardium Leviosa!*” I caught the top of the tree before it impacted with my head and then the ground, but a shower of loose branches, leaves and rainwater fell down around me. I was soaked all over again in cool, refreshing water. A white blur burst out from within the long, knotted branches and squawked furious disapproval at me. “Heh, sorry, Hedwig. Of all the trees to pick...” My owl disappeared around the side of the house, probably never to return.

I levitated the tree-top back up and over the severed trunk and hurled it across the tree line and into the meadowland surrounding the château in all directions. The mass of wood and leaves struck the ground with a dull thud and the sound of a hundred branches splintering at once.

“*Merde, ‘Arry, what are you doing?*”

I looked over my shoulder, ignoring the deep growl the Bone-Man was sending my way and met Fleur’s eyes. “Lopping a tree, I guess...” I turned back to the tree and directed my wand towards the base of the trunk, just above the complex warren of thick roots that claimed the soil. “*Lacero!*”

My second beam of magical-chainsaw-light tore through the base of the deciduous oak just as neatly as the first, dissipating to nothing on the far side in a plume of sawdust. With a mighty groan of something dying, the severed trunk began to tip on its side towards the house.

The sheer weight of the thing would tear through the wood and plaster of Fleur's home as if it were tissue paper.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" It was a damn-sight heavier than a feather, but my intent was sure, and I caught the trunk as it was still mostly upright in a levitation charm. I chuckled. "Harry smash now."

I stepped backward towards the garden path, directing my forty-feet of thick oak tree to hover just overhead and to the left. The tree and I moved silently in the night, watched by five pairs of incredulous eyes, and one pair of malevolent yellow ones. I brought the weight of my wooden hammer to rest just above the captured Bone-Man.

"Here's the deal then," I said, speaking to no one and everyone – to the demon just out of reach. "Someone always has to try and stop the madness, don't they, and we all know that a Killing Curse wouldn't even scratch you, would it, Bone-Man?"

Those terrible yellow-eyes, fetid and dark, beheld me with a look of what could almost be mistaken for understanding. They flickered up to the wide base of the trunk hovering directly over it, and then back down to me. The misshapen jaws of the thing's head opened wide. *"Íló... vráx'jóé'hóth... 'déf'ón—"*

A shiver rushed through me at the Hellspeak. I raised my voice above it as what little light there was, from all sources, grew dim under those hideous words. "No time to go track down some dragon's fire - and who knows what might come along to set you loose in the meantime? – so here's the three-dollar solution!"

"Síóá'k... Í'arnáz—"

With a snarl I flicked my wand down and slammed a good forty-feet of oak tree into the Bone-Man. I heard either Emilie or Grace screaming behind me and Alain cursed quite spectacularly. Of Fleur there was no sound, and I didn't look back. The trunk disappeared about three feet into the wet earth, and the Bone-Man with it, in a mess of ill-jointed limbs that splintered like twigs.

I almost sighed at the sound. *Oh, that's satisfying...* My beam of white rune-magic disappeared into the earth under the trunk, not

letting a little thing like several tonnes of oak tree stop it from doing its job.

The world was strangely silent after that, the light returning as the last syllables of demon-tongue faded on the warm night air. I flicked my wand back towards the sky, drawing the length of the oak tree out of the ground and up above what remained of the Bo—

Two skeletal arms, blazing silver, reached out for me, razor-sharp claws swiping at the air. “*Bé’lál... F’ÓRNÍ—*”

Yep, flicked my wand down, slamming the base of the trunk back into the mangled and hewn pile of steaming bones. I caught a glimpse of heavy, acrid smoke – as black as the night and as lively as living shadow – pooling around the Bone-Man before my makeshift giant hammer crushed it... again.

“Yikes,” I chanced a look over my shoulder and tried to look as surprised as I felt. I met Fleur’s eyes and found her gaze unreadable. Hmm... I was in trouble. Of that, I could always be sure.

I turned back to the oak tree and began to spin my wand in slow circles through the air. The trunk mimicked my movements and rotated clockwise in the ground. I could hear muffled screams from the Bone-Man as I applied a fair helping of magical force to the trunk. It began to spin faster and faster and I grinded the monster beneath it into so much pathetic dust.

It’s awful to say, but few things in this world feel as good as having complete and utter control over a life – and ending it. Of overcoming a challenge and snuffing out the competition... does that make me as much of a monster as the Bone-Man? In a way, yes, but there were enough villains and madmen trying to do the same to me.

I was just keeping the playing-field level.

The stench of sulphur had been overpowered by a more pungent stink – death, or something like it. Thick, oily smoke, as black as shadow, seeped up and out of the ground around the trunk, and the splintered bark withered and flaked away at its touch. The cries of the Bone-Man had abruptly ceased a few moments ago.

I got the feeling the job was done.

Just to be sure, I lifted the trunk up and out of the ground, keeping my wand at the ready to drop it back down if what remained of the Bone-Man so much as twitched. Through the wet earth I'd burrowed a hole about six feet deep with my novelty-size wooden grinder. At its base, in a pool of liquid-smoke that burned with flames of dark yellow-black light, chunks of crushed bone sizzled and hissed in the heat of the fire.

Nothing remained of the Bone-Man that was recognisable. Already misshapen and difficult to comprehend, the creature had been smashed into a few loose pieces of dull silver bone. Even as I watched the black smog and flames were dissolving what was left of the demon, erasing its presence and existence from this world.

"Yep," I said, and levitated my tree trunk back across the garden and through the gap in the tree line, dumping the shaft of wood on the dark meadowlands just beyond sight. It landed with a loud *thud* that rattled the windows of Fleur's house in their frames. "Done is done... is done."

With the Bone-Man dead the world seemed a lot lighter. Funny how that worked. How the creatures' very presence seemed to make everything feel that much harder. Funny, but no one was laughing.

What I'd just done – and everything I'd said – looked quite crazy on reflection. A shiver rushed through my entire body as I realised I might have alienated Fleur, turned her... not against me, but not *really* with me. I'd worked some pretty impressive magic – frightening magic – nothing too apocalyptic, but that binding rune alone counted for more than most in this age of ordered and tepid magic. And the way I'd kept my head, so to speak, when faced with the demon... I didn't look *normal*.

I spun on the spot, fearing the worst...

And found things much worse than the worst.

"Bravo, Harry James Potter, bravo!"

Fleur stood stock-still, her chin held high, shaking on the spot in the light offered by her open front door. She was the closest to me, her feet brushing the beginnings of the muddy garden path, and her friends still stood in the doorway... terrified and unable to act, for fear of getting her killed.

A man stood behind Fleur – holding a long knife of dry, grey metal to her elegant throat, the hilt of the blade resting just beneath her ear, and one arm around her waist, holding her tight.

My heart began to race.

“Barbaric, no doubt, crushing poor Boney like that, but no one can fault your resolve – and believe me, they want to.” The man threw back his head and laughed. “Oh they want to, yes, yes.”

He was young, athletic and tall – his eyes were blue, his hair wavy and black, streaked with bolts of crimson-red. It was the small details that stood out the loudest at times like this. “I... you...” I searched for the right words. Things were happening very quickly. *Too quickly*. “You do know that you’ve just signed your life away, don’t you?”

He was wearing a suit of the exact same cut as mine, down to the silver buttons and shiny black shoes. Only his was in a lot better condition – free of mud and blood – and he had a grin plastered onto his face that, beneath the laughter in his eyes, looked *hideous*. I imagined the one on my own face, streaked with drying blood from the gash above my ear, looked no better.

“Arry...” Fleur whispered, and her throat moved up and down, pushing against the knife. A line of crimson-clear blood bloomed along her neck, barely a scratch, but the new monster had made her bleed, and the number one goal in my life would now be to tear this bastard’s heart from his chest.

“Ah, oops...” The stranger chuckled. “Hey, that’s a nice suit, Harry James Potter, yes, yes. I have one just like that.”

“Let her go,” I said. My gaze should have burned him to ash.

The man frowned, and then he nodded. "Oh, okay." And he did, removing the knife carefully from Fleur's throat so as not to cause her further harm, and stepping back.

"*To me, Fleur,*" I said quickly, and she ran down the path without question. I raised my wand against the knife-wielding stranger. "Red, green, or blue, friend?"

"Pardon me, Harry James Potter? I do not follow." He still held the knife, but his hands were folded in front of him – his tone was polite, cultured.

I was unnerved. I hated that feeling so *goddamn* much. Nothing should be new to me, nothing at all. Tonight was entirely new – this man was entirely new.

"Red, green, or blue," I said slowly. "The colour of the curse that will kill you. Red will snap your neck, and that might hurt for a minute. Green will be swift, instant – probably your best option – whereas blue... you'll bleed out in about three minutes if you choose blue, but that sort of tingles – doesn't hurt." I clicked my fingers a few times. "Personally, blue might be the most exciting from an end-of-your-life viewpoint."

"Exciting? I would not know, I have never died." He tilted his head down, and his grin seemed to stretch up to his ears. "Is it exciting to die, Harry James Potter? Yes, yes?"

More than one death rushed through my mind on a wave of bitter failure and agony. My most recent death in Diagon Alley a few days ago on the sword of Tweedledum or Tweedledee... That scar was itching over my chest. Still, it was not the most pressing mystery – this man knew who I was, and what I could do. Which made him more than a man...

"Who are you?"

"Ah, a pertinent question. Yes, yes..." He took a few steps forward, waving his dagger back and forth. "*Who are you?*"

Behind him, Alain and Matthieu raised their wands, pointing them at his back. I met their eyes and shook my head. "You'll answer me—"

He cut me off. "I'm a balance of... *forces*, Harry James Potter. Yes, yes. Forces. Two sides of a coin, fifty-fifty, up and down... opposite forces." He laughed, tossing that damned dagger between his hands. "Today I am your friend, tomorrow I shall try my best to kill you."

"Get *off* my property," Fleur said on my left, holding a hand to her throat. Her eyes were narrowed and enraged.

He had appeared out of nowhere – silent apparation, I thought – but no... I hadn't noticed it straight away behind his width and height, but behind the young man was something I had seen before, two and a half days ago in Diagon Alley. Hanging in the air, just in front of the house, was a... *gap*. Just in the air, about three feet off the ground, a thin slit of nothing – a tear in the fabric of reality. No one else in the Alley had been able to see it, but touching its razor-edge had sliced open my finger. I knew without a doubt this man – or whatever he was – had stepped out of this narrow opening that led... *somewhere*.

"You are really in over your beautiful head, child," the man said to Fleur. "Isn't she just, Harry James Potter?"

"If you—" Fleur began, but I placed a gentle hand on her arm and she fell silent, glaring at me but acquiescing.

"What can I call you then?" I asked. "Demon..? Dark Lord, even?"

The young man's eyes danced with mirth he didn't even try to suppress. "My name is Chronos."

Dumbledore's words in the Magnus Fontis flashed through my mind. "*Saturnia in Roman mythology, Harry, was the goddess of Time. She appeared as a woman of unrivalled beauty who was there to settle grave accounts between mortals and archaic deities.*" And there was more. "*Saturnia – and her Greek partner, Chronos – guarded the sanctity of time itself.*"

"So we're playing at gods, are we?" I scoffed. "You're a *supposed* guardian of time."

"Time." Chronos grinned. "Whose time? *My time, your time, her time?* Time's time, Harry James Potter, you know that – better than most. Yes, yes?"

"No, no."

"No?"

"No," I nodded. "No lies, no cryptic riddles or misleading truths. I want to know what you are, what your agenda is, and why you're trying to kill me."

"Today I am not trying to kill you." Chronos shrugged, moving another step closer, that knife almost a blur as he tossed it from hand to hand. "My nature, you see. Yes, yes... today I want you alive, and in the game. Tomorrow I want you dead, to put a stop to your interference. Balance, balance, *a/ways* balance. Night and day, light and dark... war and peace. It is the way of the universe."

I didn't follow – at all. This was all different, all new, and it was ruining my chances of building a relationship with Fleur. "You're not making any sense. If you're not trying to kill me, why'd you send that Bone-Man? That was you, wasn't it? You were listening to the story."

Chronos laughed until a tear rolled down his cheek. "Pretty lady has a nice story voice – *beautiful* story voice. The Bone-Man, as you call it, Harry James Potter, was sent as a warning, a warning the only way you'd understand, and it was tasked to kill the pretty lady – not you."

I stepped in front of Fleur with a snarl, brandishing my wand forward and ready to unleash the fires of forgotten, ancient magic. For a single moment everything seemed to pause, the whole world held its breath, and then I opened my mouth to release a cur—

"Hear me out," Chronos snapped, and his demeanour changed to cold anger so quickly that I stopped. It was gone a moment later, hidden again under that horrible grin. "You want to hear what I have to say, yes, yes."

"It better be good."

His smile could have cut glass. This bastard smiled way too much. "You have met Saturnia, have you not? She spoke of someone who has taken you seriously, and that wants you dead... I am that someone. I sent the Orc-mare after you, to sever your magic, to send you into the final sleep... and reset the chaos."

"And yet here I am, alive and well." *The Orc-mare? Tweedledum and Tweedledee...*

"Yes, yes – exactly. And today, being alive, that *is* well."

Fleur whispered in my ear, "Arry, what iz he talking about?"

I had an idea, and it was awful. "So you can't make up your mind whether you want me dead or alive?"

Chronos shook his head. "There are benefits to seeing you die – great benefits – and there are benefits to seeing you succeed in your quest to destroy the old world – also, great benefits. I have made up my mind, I do so every day – every second of every minute of every day. Today, I want you in the game." He paused. "Tomorrow is a coin toss, and I may annihilate you half a world away..."

I tried to wrap my head around that. "You haven't yet, and you won't... you can't."

"Do not presume to understand *me*, Harry James Potter. You, a mere mortal, matched against the wrath of a god."

My grip tightened around my wand. "I wouldn't bet against me."

"No..." Chronos sighed. "Neither would Saturnia. It is a cruel twist of fate that you suffer so much to gain so little, and that destiny blocks all the exits, so you circle closer, and closer... to the *flame*."

"You and Saturnia are not gods." He merely smiled that infuriating smile. I changed tacts. "Why did Saturnia take my blood?"

Chronos blinked, and it was my turn to smile. He'd just flinched. I got the feeling he had no idea what I was talking about. He wasn't all-

knowing and all-wise. I guess there were good gods and bad gods, false gods and would-be-gods.

“You fascinate her, Harry James Potter,” Chronos eventually said, and did I detect a hint of *jealously* in his tone...?

No, surely not.

“I’m going to tell you once to leave me alone,” I said. “Over the last few days you and Saturnia have done enough to warrant your destruction, but you get one warning... this is it.”

“Tonight I send one Bone-Man, as you call the denizens of Hell, Harry James Potter, tomorrow I may send a thousand.” Chronos laughed. “It is my nature, yes, yes. And I am so very sorry. Yet tonight, at least, I want to see you succeed, and raise Atlantis from the ashes of time. So I have something for you...”

Chronos reached out into the air, and his hand disappeared into nothing – into absolutely nothing. And from that nothing he pulled a long hilt fused to a blade of cool, dark metal. He tossed it towards me through the air.

I caught it on pure reflex, and the would-be-god took another step closer, just out of arm’s reach now. “Why are you giving this to me?” I had to admit, I was mesmerised by the sword in my hand. It was long, just over a metre, and the blade was thick – of a metal I couldn’t recognise, and the design was apt, if nothing else...

Chronos’ grin faltered. He fought it for a moment, but eventually his smile failed. “Because the game has changed.” He shook his head. “You’ve changed it.”

“How so?” I whispered, following the edge of the sword towards its tip. The blade bulged at the top, at the north point, and two longer points aiming east and west from the tip reached out, infinitely sharp, almost making the weapon a double-bladed axe. “It looks like the hand of a clock – the long minute hand.”

“Time,” Chronos replied. “Oh, Harry James Potter, *time*.” He reached forward and ran his pale finger up the length of the blade in my hand.

“Who better to wield time itself, a weapon that can hack through the armies of the void, of Hell, than a Time Warrior – his very sword a symbol of all that passes around him.”

I shook my head. “A sword will just slow me down.” I tossed the blade aside, over into the grass. It hit the ground with a muddy thud. “If you’re not full of bullshit, why give me a weapon that could kill a Bone-Man, when not even magic can really do that?”

Chronos closed the gap between myself and Fleur, gripping his knife firmly. The tip of my wand sparked with barely suppressed curse light... I wanted to attack, to kill and maim and bring destruction down upon this pretender before me. But I didn’t – for one thing, I wasn’t sure I could take him. Perhaps he felt the same about me.

“Because today I want you *alive*, Harry.” Chronos stressed his words. “Tomorrow, more than likely, I’ll want you dead. The sword is to ensure you have a fighting chance of surviving anything I send against you. You see, yes, yes? I aid you today, as best I can, in my best interests, so the other half of my nature – the balance – does not tip the scales tomorrow, or yesterday, or five minutes from now.”

“I... see.” And I did – it made a crazy kind of sense, if whatever Chronos truly was became bound by his nature like he claimed. “You want me to reach Atlantis, why?”

Chronos shook his head, barely chuckling now. “Oh, Harry James Potter, you know the trials and tribulations of the Lost City, drowned in the blood of the Old World.” He glanced at Fleur, gazing through her and at something beyond sight. “You know of the power there, yet you have barely scratched the surface of its... *potential*.”

He was being careful with his words, so to speak. He didn’t want to give away to Fleur that I had died, and died again, attempting to defeat Voldemort and avert worldwide catastrophe. That I had already been to Atlantis, unlocked its secrets.

“How so?” I said carefully, my tone guarded.

“The old world... Atlantis... it is where the heathen gods entered this world, and their legacy speaks to those that will listen. I...” He looked

troubled – afraid. “...I can’t explain it any better than that, not to a mortal mind.”

“Try me.”

“No – you only need to know one more thing.”

I weighed up my options, and chose the worst. “What?” I needed to know.

“That if you don’t take up my gift, that if you turn aside from Atlantis – as you might, oh yes, yes – I will send more Bone-Men and worse after this young lady here.” Chronos winked at Fleur. “I will end her existence, just as surely as your Dark Lord Voldemort would. You changed this game, Harry James Potter, you challenged fate, and now here is how the board is set.”

He very nearly pushed me over the edge. I admired my own restraint. “Leave. Now.” I bit each word off as if it were a Killing Curse. Oh how I wanted this man before me dead and his ashes scattered to the four winds. No one, absolutely no one, used the world I knew against me like this. “Leave... before *my* nature asserts itself.”

Chronos laughed. “Goodbye, Harry James Potter.” He moved to place a hand on my shoulder, still holding that knife, and then thought better of it. “You know, the next time I see you I will probably want you dead.”

I offered this god a crooked smile. There was nothing friendly about it. We were at a stalemate, neither of us willing to strike the first blow. Perhaps I should have, perhaps I *will*, but not today. “And the next time I see you, I’ll show you why they call me Godslayer...”

Chronos frowned bemusedly. “Who, Harry James Potter? Who calls you that?”

“Heh, well, I...” I paused, my mind suddenly blank. No, not blank, there was just no memory. *Who calls me Godslayer?* “I-I do.”

Chronos sighed and reached down to pat me on the shoulder. “It must be very lonely inside that head of yours.”

I wanted to snap his arm off – I would've done, and hang the consequences – but I blinked and he was gone.

Fleur gasped and I cursed beneath my breath, as air rushed into the space Chronos had occupied with a short, quick and noisy *clap*. I felt a rush of relief as he disappeared, and the gap in the world a stone's throw away sealed itself away to nothing. I didn't know what those gaps were, but they were the work of Saturnia and this new chap, the one who had taken me seriously, Chronos – which made them bad news.

"Can you believe all this...?" I whispered, turning to look at Fleur. My head was throbbing to the beat of my heart, and my vision was a little impaired without my glasses, but I understood the look on her face perfectly. I was in trouble – big time. "I'm sorry all of this happened tonight, Fleur."

Fleur said nothing for a long moment. "Tonight was utter madness, 'Arry. Complete and utter *madness*! Are you sure we are done? Will zere be any more surprises? Voldemort himself, perhaps? *Merde*, you scare me 'alf to death!"

I didn't quite know what to say. All at once I felt just fifteen – just little Harry Potter, and nothing more. "You're bleeding."

Fleur held a hand to her perfect neck. "No, *you* are bleeding. If the madness is over for the evening, then come inside and I will clean out that wound – with magic, mind you – no Muggle stitching, and we will discuss what 'as just 'appened, and where we go from here."

From here? Perhaps there was hope for me yet. Fleur stormed off back towards her house, and her gob-smacked friends. There was an explosion of words from them all at the same time as Fleur cleared the threshold of her home, casting a cool glance over her shoulder to make sure I was following.

I shuffled slowly up the garden path, as if climbing the gallows with a noose already tightened around my neck, dreading what was to come, and how I was going to explain even *half* of what had happened – what Fleur and her friends had seen, what I had done.

For the first time in a long time, I questioned my decision to break the flow of Time and send my soul back eight years to this summer, to the beginning of the war that ends the world... All of my choices always led to the suffering and death of those I could care for, of those who trusted me to set all to right. And now beings that might as well be called gods were using me for their own ends – I had more enemies than when I'd started.

I had to ask myself if it would just be best to let the world die...

I paused only to pick up my shattered glasses and to gaze at the sword that Chronos had left behind, made of some unknown metal and shaped like the hand of the clock. I reached out my hand to grasp the blade... but...

"Arry, you need to get cleaned up." Fleur was not in the mood for an argument.

"I'm coming," I said, and left the sword lying in the sodden grass.

The game has changed, I thought, and not for the better.

Events were spiralling out of my control – faces and monsters were moving against me and *with* me, all in new and unexpected ways. I could not stay ahead of the game if the rules had changed, if I could no longer cheat my way through what was to come.

I was vulnerable... and what's more, so were those closest to me.

I closed Fleur's front door behind me as I stepped back into the house after what felt like hours. A small sigh escaped my lips as warmth rushed into my tired and wet limbs, yet it was one of regret.

Regrets are forever...

One thing I knew for certain, out of all of this. Wherever I went from here, Fleur had to come with me.

Her life – and what remained of my sanity – depended on that.

A/N: *Lacero is Latin for lacerate – go figure. Thanks for reading and hopefully reviewing. Did I do good? It's three in the morning so I'm knackered now – sweet dreams, folks.*

Chapter 11 – It's Me Again, Harry

Part Two – The Trickster

*He said, son, I've made a life out of readin' peoples faces,
And knowin' what their cards were by the way they held their eyes.
So if you don't mind me saying, I can see you're out of aces.
For a taste of your whiskey, I'll give you some advice...*

--Kenny Rogers

Okay, so time is separated by miles of regret.

And regret is forever.

*So the space between Then, Now, and Soon is eternal. Which begs
the question... How in the hell could I reach back in time across to
eternity to roll the dice again?*

It should be impossible.

"This iz fairly deep, 'Arry."

I winced as Fleur dabbed the gash across my head, just above my ear, with a damp towel. "Ow..."

"Oh, this you complain about?" she snapped. "You stitch two 'alves of your chest back together this afternoon, and zis *leetle* dabbing hurts you?"

I chuckled under my breath. Her accent was coming through pretty strong. She was worked up, all right. "Head wounds always hurt a little more than anything else – except for hand wounds, I suppose. The hands are most sensitive to pain."

Fleur relented, dipping the towel back into the warm water in the sink, diluted cherry-red with my blood. For a few minutes she just cleaned

the wound, washed my hair clear of dirt and blood, and I grinned and bared the discomfort in silence.

I was sitting on the waist-high cabinets just next to the sink, and in the mirror across the bathroom I could see the back of Fleur's head, her golden hair flowing to her waist in thick damp strands. Her bare feet and legs to the knee were covered in flecks of mud and blades of grass. Her dress had dried out a bit, but her form was still breathtakingly-visible beneath the floral pattern. My face looked hideous above her reflection, pale and half-slicked with blood.

No face a beauty could care for – especially one I had terrified.

The silence stretched on... a thin drabble of blood still flowed from my head, but the wound was clotting nicely.

Two more minutes passed... Fleur's dabbing became gentler as she moved over my wound itself...

"Are you going to tell me what 'appened tonight, 'Arry?"

"You know what happened," I replied, glancing at the thin line of blood that ran across the right side of Fleur's throat, a mark from Chronos' knife. Just a scratch, but still... it made me want to kill something.

Fleur *tsked*, annoyed at my side-stepping. "Then *why* did eet 'appen?"

"I've more enemies than just Voldemort, Fleur." I paused, reflecting on that particular understatement, and sighed. "A lot more... most of them powerful and dangerous."

Only they're enemies and friends, it seems. Chronos' double nature, if that was what he had, helped me one day and sent demon-assassins after me another. All for his great benefits. And as for Saturnia... she wanted me dead, but not right now, which led me to believe I was being used and set-up for something. But what? If Saturnia was a goddess, as she claimed, what did she need me to do? And why take my blood? To keep track of me?

My headache was pounding a beat through my mind faster and surer than my heart.

"I saw the impossible tonight, didn't I?" Fleur asked me, her eyes daring me to lie.

"You saw..." I really needed the right words. I needed *time* to find them. Time was all I had. "The future. You saw the future, should Voldemort seize Atlantis unchallenged."

"That man... the one with ze knife... he spoke of Atlantis as if eet were real, too."

"It is."

Fleur bit her bottom lip, searching for the lie in my face – searching to see if I had dared. "You believe that," she said finally. "Even in our world there are limits to the make-belief, 'Arry. I want to believe you."

"You will," I said, quiet and sure.

Fleur finished cleaning away the blood on the side of my head, enough at least so she could see what she was doing as she raised her wand, resting the tip just above my wound. "This will stem ze blood flow, clot ze wound," she said, and then paused. "That iz, if magic works on you this time. *Verios!*"

Reflected in the mirror on the far wall I saw a clear blue stream of liquid-light settle over the side of my head. It was cool, cool and tingly, and it tickled right through my head and down my spine. I giggled a little bit – very manly and tough, that's me.

"Well, eet seems some of ze rules still apply to you. There will be no Muggle *stitching*, at least." Fleur checked the gash again. "*Oui*, I can seal that... Hold still, *Acerio!*"

I felt the skin under my hair tightening and knitting itself back together, as the pain from the gash faded away to nothing. A moment later and all that remained of my wound was the blood that had flowed down onto my face.

"Thank you," I said. With the pain of that gone, my constant headache could take pride of place once more.

"You are welcome." Fleur picked up my glasses off the marble bench-top. "*Reparo!*"

The cracked lenses replaced themselves with whole glass. I slipped them onto my face, and the world came into a little better focus. "And thank you again."

Fleur wasn't in the mood for pleasantries. "I barely recognised you out there tonight, 'Arry. *Eet* was a stranger battling the monsters and that madman with ze knife."

"It was me," I replied, taking a deep breath. "The me the world sees battling a Dark Lord." I let my breath out slowly. "Chosen One, Boy Who Lived, and all that crap."

"You looked..." Fleur struggled for the words.

We were both struggling for words this evening. I saw her deciding whether or not to say it. I admired her for a moment. She was beautiful, no question there. I wanted her the way a man dying of thirst needed water. I said what she was thinking. "Insane? Mad? Crazy? A few knuts short of a galleon?"

"*Oui...*" Fleur looked nervous. "Yes."

"Well..." I worked for a gentle smile, and found one. "How do I seem now?"

"Back to normal, like you were when we were cooking earlier. Yet..."

Fleur hesitated. She was standing so close, and I struggled to keep my eyes on her face and not the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed deeply, steeling herself. "Yet?"

"Yet you arrive at my home bleeding from a stab wound, which you sew back together as if that iz just everyday for you, then we 'ave a pleasant afternoon shopping together, as if *that* iz just everyday for you, and now this... *this...*" Fleur's tone grew quiet. "You destroy a

demon of such, such *impossibility*, and talk fast enough and clever enough to set ze devil on fire to a man holding a blade to my throat—”

“As if that is just everyday for me,” I cut in, seeing her point.

Fleur nodded. “There is no *certainty* to you, ‘Arry. No foundation, no point to start on. You understand, *oui?*”

“*Oui*,” I said softly. *Oh, yes, more than you can know.*

“For all that matters, ‘Arry, we are friends – you ‘ave saved my life more than once now—”

“Your life is in danger because of me.” I wanted that to be very clear, at the forefront of Fleur’s mind for the decision that had to be made soon. Whether or not she was to come with me.

“Without you I would ‘ave died in Diagon Alley, yet my life iz endangered now because of you, *oui?*” Fleur seemed to stand taller saying that, saying the words that cut right through me. “I don’t blame you, ‘Arry – you are ‘Arry Potter, after all, but there iz more to all of this than you are telling me, of that I am sure.”

“What do you want me to say?” I asked.

“The truth, perhaps? I’m not a leetle girl, I can ‘andle whatever you may say.”

And for a moment there I almost did say it. The truth, I mean. Why not? After all is said and done, why not? *I’m a time-traveller, Fleur. I’ve lived more lives than I can remember, and each one has ended in so much blood and fire that I drowned in it even as I burned...*

Why not say it?

Because in the eyes of the folks who only had one life to live, one life to give, it turned me into a monster. And after the night we’d just had, it would tip the balance against me in Fleur’s regard.

Fleur read most of what I was thinking on my face. “You show few emotions, ‘Arry, yet those you do are very easy to read. You’ve nothing to say to me, ‘ave you?”

“I’m not one to complain, but it isn’t easy doing what I do... you know?”

Fleur shook her head, and looked down at the floor tiles. “I was not much help to you out there... you must think me helpless.”

“You held your ground,” I said. “And your nerve. To me, to Harry *bloody* Potter – who does this kind of thing all the time – you were dazzling.”

Fleur looked up. “Really?”

I held my tongue for a moment, and brought my calloused hand – burnt from the fiery-sword in Tivoli – up to gently brush the skin of Fleur’s throat, just around the thin line of blood. “My eyes weren’t on the Bone-Man, or Chronos, more than they had to be...”

Fleur’s intense blue eyes, chips of cool diamond, were two parts unreadable and one part oddly vulnerable. “‘Arry...”

I could feel her pulse under my fingertips, and the beat of it moved silkily up my arm, making me shiver. I felt a rush of pleasant warmth, and for a moment forgot my many... *many* worries. “Fleur...”

“‘Arry...” The gorgeous French witch steadied herself, and her eyes became wholly unreadable. “‘Arry, I am furious with you.”

The moment passed, and I slowly removed my hand from her soft neck. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m sorry I can’t heal that... Healing magic,” I shook my head, “just doesn’t really work for me. I’ll probably do more harm than good.”

“That’s okay—”

There was a loud knock from outside the bathroom and down the hallway, against the front door. Three hard sure knocks, swift and with authority. Someone was here – out the front of the house. My

hand had reflexively gripped the hilt of my wand poking out of my pocket.

“A visitor?” Fleur frowned. “Arry, could it be...?”

I shook my head. “Demons, for the most part, don’t bother knocking.”

The house was mostly silent and the long, slow creak of the wooden front door being drawn open echoed loudly down the hall and into the bathroom. Fleur and I waited for a scream or worse from any of her friends, who had been sitting quietly in the living room for the last several minutes, probably in several varying states of shock.

Muffled voices travelled down the hallway. One of them sounded like Grace.

“Oui, monsieur. Les Aurors.”

Two deeper voices that I didn’t recognise followed her words, too swift and too low for me to catch and translate. Fleur seemed to do better than I, for her eyes widened and she stepped away from me, making for the hallway. I leapt down off the marble bench-top and followed her, grabbing my all-too-important briefcase on the run.

We moved down the hall and to the bend in the corridor that gave way to the kitchen on the right. I paused there, resting just against the wooden-panelled wall, and dropped my briefcase at my feet. I was a mess, and whoever it was sounded very official. Fleur glanced back at me once before turning down the entrance hall.

Remaining just out of sight, I tilted my head to hear what was said.

“Good evening, gentleman,” Fleur said, and in English – probably for my benefit – maybe just because she’d been in England for the better part of eighteen months. “How may I help you this evening?”

“Mademoiselle Delacour?” one of the unseen men said. “I am Gabriel Pedont, and this is Francis Arnair. We are from the National Office of Magical Law Enforcement.”

Aurors, I thought. *That’s what Grace had said.*

“Aurors,” Fleur spoke aloud.

She was closest to me, and unconsciously took a step back to block me from view if I poked my head around the corner or something. From where I leaned against the wall, I could just make out the curve of her jaw, and smell the freshness of her hair. Rainfall and strawberries – always and forever strawberries.

“Yes, ma’am,” the Auror, Pedont, said. His tone was absolutely deadpan and serious. I could sense the stress in it, and wondered what the deal was. “We received an alarm that high levels of unknown magic were used within your property’s wards about thirty minutes ago.”

Fleur hesitated a moment too long. An Auror would notice that. “Really?”

“*Oui, mademoiselle.* Several of the wards surrounding your home ‘ave failed. We would ‘ave responded much sooner, yet you are no doubt aware of the current crisis back in Paris. Is everything well?”

Crisis back in Paris? A nervous, defeated feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. Something was most definitely... up.

“As well as can be, I suppose.” Fleur’s cool regard was firmly in place. Without a doubt any male with blood in his veins would feel intimidated by her fierce beauty.

Also, she was lying by omission – to protect me. I felt strangely saddened by that.

“There are signs of a struggle outside, and large amounts of water and churned up lawn, and the glass is cracked in a few of your windows.” Pedont was good at his job, from the sounds of things. “You and your guests also seem... out of sorts.”

“I assure you, we are well,” Fleur repeated, running a hand back through her long hair. It had gone a little frizzy due to the rain, yet that in no way detracted from her overall *hotness*.

“Are you people alone in this home?”

“Non,” came a voice I recognised, before Fleur could say otherwise. “There is a boy in ze bathroom, he is responsible for the mess you see outside.”

Oh, fuck you, Sébastien, fuck you...

Fleur leaned back and glanced right at me, her eyes questioning our next move. I shrugged, and decided to introduce myself. I was a mess, my face was still slick with blood, and my suit was drying wrinkled and streaked with muddy dirt. No matter, although how best to explain this one away?

I stepped out from behind the corner, around Fleur and with a smile on my face. “Hey, fellas,” I said to the two men, taking in their tight-fitting, no doubt spell-protected, dark blue robes and their drawn wands, pointing at rest towards the floor.

Both of them appraised me as I did them, and I saw a flicker of recognition in both of their eyes as they saw past the blood on my face, probably right to the jagged lightning-bolt scar on my forehead.

“*Arry Potter!*” one of the Aurors gasped, his face going slack. Goddamn price of fame. That past a second later as his training kicked in, and both of the Aurors’ faces hardened into something ugly.

All at once I knew I was in trouble.

Two wands were raised against me, two grim-faced Aurors beheld me with open hostility in their eyes. “Harry Potter,” the larger of the two men snapped, and that voice was Pedont (who spoke very good English), stepping forward to face me. “You are under arrest for the assassination of President Laurent!”

What followed was a very pregnant pause...

And then I blinked. “Wait... what?”

“Surrender your wand!” the Auror growled.

My wand was in my hand – when had that happened? – and I’d half-raised my arm as if to strike. Fleur’s head snapped to look at me so

fast that I was scared she'd done damage, and from the open doorway that led into the living room stood Grace, Alain, Sébastien and the others, frozen in the moment, and once again regarding me with sheer disbelief – some people, the lucky ones, were alive just to get caught in my dust.

"Assassination?" I was flummoxed. Hell of a word that, *flummoxed*.
"Wha—? When?"

I caught Auror Pedont's next move before he made it – I saw it in his eyes, as sure as sixpence.

"*Protego!*" I cried, in the same split-second that Pedont twisted his wand and roared, "*STUPEFY!*"

A blue shield of energy erupted wall-to-wall in front of Fleur and myself to intercept the stunning spell (thankfully stunning spell – predictable Auror's Handbook stuff), the red magic rippling across its surface in concentric circles.

I was already moving as it hit, pulling Fleur with me back around the corner and out of the line of fire. She had her wand in hand yet seemed momentarily stunned of the need for it. I grinned at her, and it would have been terrible with the blood on my face and the dark, awful confusion in my eyes.

"Be reasonable, guys!" I called around the corner, hiding the thrill and excitement I felt. I led an... *invigorating* life.

"Toss out your wand, Potter," Pedont replied. "Matters will turn from bad to worse if you 'arm Mademoiselle Delacour!"

Oh and the absurdity of that remark made me laugh. I tried to stifle it, I truly did. Harm Fleur? I'd watched her die time and time again, I'd failed to keep her from harm so often and so epically that for her (and one particular shape-shifting other) I'd broken the Laws of Time and used the Keys of the Past.

Much good it's done me so far – kept me in the game, I suppose – damn the consequences to all levels of Hell.

Harm precious Fleur? Strawberries and rainfall?

I'd cheated death and time to keep her safe. Her, Nymphadora – apples and white roses – the whole fucking world. And all for another shot at the world-title against Voldemort.

Still, I could use Pedont's assumption to buy some time and think things through...

"Take one step closer, Auror Pedont, and any harm that comes to her will be your doing."

Not exactly proving my innocence in the whole 'assassination' accusation, was I, but I needed time—no, no I didn't. I had time, I needed the right order of things. But this was new, I didn't know what had happened or why, and so far anything new was a direct result of either Saturnia's or Chronos' interference.

Pedont swore quite admirably in his native tongue, yet I didn't hear any advancing footsteps. I had a minute, at the most.

During the spell fire I'd grabbed Fleur, pushed her against the wall, and I stood close enough to her now, almost holding her in place, that her lips were barely a hand's span away from mine. I was *sorely* tempted to seize the moment. Her eyes – more often than not unreadable – regarded me with disbelief and... a *want*. A want for this not to be happening, and for me to make sense of it all. The *thrill* had to be rushing through her veins, as well.

I shook my head, holding her gaze. "Sorry again," I whispered, just for us.

"You're wanted for murder, Potter," Pedont called, his tone daring me to step out from around the corner into the hallway. "Assassination of our country's leader – there's nowhere you can run that we won't find you. No nation that will offer you protection. Surrender and all of this will come to a stop now."

"I didn't kill anybody," I replied, still with my eyes on Fleur's. "Do you believe me?"

“*Oui*,” Fleur whispered. “Yes.” And such is the decisions we make for those we care about, without a moment’s hesitation. I could see that it cost Fleur a lot to say that to the dangerous fool who had brought more than one war to her doorstep this evening.

“If there’s been a mistake,” Pedont said, thinking my question was for him, “then it will be cleared up in the appropriate time. For now, you must come with us.”

“You trust me then?” I said, again loud enough for the Aurors to hear me. Yet the question was for Fleur, and Fleur alone.

“If I don’t,” Fleur replied, her voice as low as a whisper. “If I don’t then a madman with a knife ‘as promised zat demons from hell will kill me. I am left with leetle recourse. It seems I need a hero, ‘Arry.”

“*Oui*, I will.” Pedont’s patience was wearing thin. “If you surrender your wand and come quietly, I will trust you.”

“Well, then let’s go find you one...” I smiled, and if nothing else it was honest enough to appear kind through the blood-mask on my face. Fleur’s cool regard softened a notch, at least. I very nearly started to cry. “Tell me, what time is it?”

I held up my wrist and closed my eyes, pointing the face of my watch towards Fleur.

“*Eet-eet* iz five to ten, ‘Arry.”

I started undoing the buttons on my dirty shirt from the collar down, with my free hand, until I could pull the shiny chain of white-gold with the tiny golden hourglass free of its confines.

The Time-Turner.

The Time-Turner... Unique in the world, as far as I knew, in that it could propel time *forward*. Why Saturnia had modified it as I lay bleeding at her feet I may never know. *How* she had modified it... worried me.

“Five to ten, you say?” I whispered. “Five to ten Fleur says.”

It was actually 23:34 and sixteen seconds – gone half eleven. My watch had stopped forty minutes ago during that bitch-slap to the ground the demon had given me. Time flies when you're battling hell on earth, and all that's in between. The clock in my head, the constant spinning numbers and the maelstrom of forgotten, ill-gotten memories, wouldn't let me forget something as important as the time, however.

"Potter!" Pedont cried.

23:34 and twenty-two seconds. "Alright, you got me – I'm just deciding whether to come in peace or go out in a blaze of spell-fire. Give me a minute here, you ponce."

"Arry..."

"Do you know what this is, Fleur?" I held up the Time-Turner so she could see it, and at the same time slipped the slack of the chain over her head. "No? Not many people recognise them off-hand... over the next few days you're going to find out a lot of things you're better off not knowing, God help you. Biggest one of all is that I'm a time-traveller." I paused for effect.

Fleur just blinked.

I rolled my eyes, and reached down to pick up my special briefcase. "Duelled a Dark Lord, defeated a slew of dark wizards, crushed a demon or two, and travelled through time... gets me nowhere. I swear, girls these days just want a sensitive guy who sips red wine and talks about his feelings in a turtleneck jumper." Hurried footsteps from down the hall – the Aurors were on their way. "Fighting a war for the future of mankind just ain't cool anymore... To the past then, Mademoiselle Delacour!"

I gave the tiny hourglass a flick with my ring finger and sent the sands of time, relative to Fleur and myself, spinning back an hour... two... three... four... five... six... seven... eight... nine full hours.

The world dissolved and my headache exploded in a fresh wave of raw pain. I screamed but the howling wind and the blur of colours and shapes rushing past me drowned out my voice. Warm blood trickled

into my mouth, coppery and fresh, from my nose, as the pressure shook and trebled and made the whole experience purely unbearable.

Suddenly the hard floor was back under my feet, and I fell to my knees as the pounding in my head threatened to knock me out cold. It hurt – oh dear sweet Heineken it hurt – and the blood flowing into my mouth wasn't just from my nose, but from the corners of my eyes as well.

Time travel – harsh mistress – I've said that before. Harsh and getting harsher. How many times could I abuse it before my head exploded?

I didn't know it was possible to piss off universal constants, but if my recent time-hopping experience was any measure, then Time was thoroughly pissed at me. If it wasn't for my tough, calm exterior and high pain threshold, then I'd be weeping more than just blood.

Damn it all, but I *hurt*.

And the pain wasn't going away. If anything, it dug in deeper – right through my brain, which felt as if it were being compressed to the size of a galleon. Black spots swam in front of my eyes, and an overwhelming sense of being absolutely no-one in nowhere washed over me.

Fuck, I thought, as the darkness washed over me like a wave of regret. I don't remember hitting the floor, only welcoming the sweet, sweet bliss of losing consciousness.

This is where it truly begins.

With Fleur Delacour. With Nymphadora Tonks.

Time and time again it does not matter which – it begins with one of them.

Nightmares within nightmares, that's our game – by hook or by crook we'll see it through. A bad dream to the very end.

You... you think you get old enough to deal with nightmares, but really you never do.

You just learn to be afraid on your own.

“Afraid on my own...” I whispered, and my eyes fluttered open to behold what was quite possibly the most beautiful sight in the world – Fleur Delacour, above me, so close that the tips of her long golden hair tickled my chin.

“Thank Merlin,” Fleur whispered. “I thought you might not awake.”

Fleur was leaning over me with a damp cloth in her hand; stained red with what I guessed was my blood. I was lying on a comfy leather sofa, my head spinning and my throat dry. “How... how long was I...?”

“Only fifteen minutes or so, ‘Arry, but eet was a long fifteen minutes. I was about ready to ‘ang ze consequences and call a Healer.”

“Oh, don’t do that...” I whispered. The pounding in my head was the constant beating of a whole platoon of drummers, bashing my skull against stretched rawhide. If this goddamn headache didn’t run its course soon I’d cut my own fucking head off... although, that would only reset the clock and make it worse. I was so, so screwed.

“I was just cleaning ze blood from your face. ‘Arry, what in Merlin’s name is ‘appening today?”

My face felt warm and fuzzy, clean, and shaking off the lethargy of sweet, sweet unconsciousness, I managed to sit up and around on the sofa next to Fleur, regaining my sense of self control.

“I used a Time-Turner to send us back about nine hours in time.” I let that sink in – from the look on her face, Fleur had surmised as much. “Probably saved a little damage to your house, seeing as how I didn’t have to wipe the floor with those two Aurors.” I took the damp cloth from Fleur and rested it against my burning forehead.

“Why am I not surprised that you possess one of ze most restricted devices in ze magical world?”

I grinned and said nothing, just relaxed with my head back.

“Tell me, ‘Arry, if this iz ze past, then aren’t we running the risk of meeting ourselves?”

I shook my head. “I’m keeping a fair track of the time – you and I, we’re shopping in Carcassonne at the moment and not due back for an hour and a half. Plenty of time to sit five minutes out and plan our next move. D-did using the Time-Turner *hurt* you? You know, like it did me...”

“*Non*, eet did not hurt at all.” Fleur seemed certain. “Made me a leetle dizzy. *You* are sure about not meeting ourselves?”

I had to admit, Fleur was taking the whole time-travel business fairly well. I remembered my first experience with a Time-Turner... Heh, girls are stronger than boys, more practical. Anyways, a Time-Turner was like a training broom compared to the forces that I meddled with. Forces that gave me this stunning headache and made my eyes bleed. I wasn’t *fit* for time-travel anymore, it seemed.

“I’m sure. We didn’t bump into ourselves when we got back from Carcassonne, did we?”

Fleur thought about that, and I knew she was questioning the choices she could make now, given the time to be relived – nine hours of events that had already happened. I pitied her for a moment there. The frustration of being able to do nothing, of being set to a path under the constraints of a Time-Turner, was still to come for her.

We’d already made our choices – going back we just got to see them from another angle. The knowledge that you could travel back in time to before something happened and still be unable to change it... was maddening. Unless, of course, one were to *blast* not just Time but their own *soul* back across the years – aye, then a difference could be made, God help the idiots (*idiot*) that tried.

“And what of ze Aurors, ‘Arry? They say you murdered a man – not just a man, but Thomas Laurent! Ze President for Magic himself!”

“Hmm... yes.” I’d been thinking about that. “From what they said, this assassination happens today – or has already happened today. Either way, what’s done is done. It wasn’t me though.” It *could* be me. There were *two* of me running around until about thirty-five minutes past eleven tonight.

The me in Carcassonne with Fleur right now wasn’t guilty – that chump would be chopping carrots for the next few hours. Was I, over the next hour or two, going to assassinate a powerful magical leader?

Fleur had failed to reach the same conclusions as I had, but she would. “If we warn someone of ze threat to ze President—”

I cut her off. “It’s already happened, Fleur – the Aurors wanted my head for it.”

“But if this iz ze past, then surely we can prevent—”

I was shaking my head before she even finished. “Time can be rewritten,” I said. “But not like that. This,” I held up the time-turner, “can really only extend the hours in a day, relative to the user. It can’t change what we know has happened.” I paused. “Or *will* happen... mores the pity.”

Time can be rewritten.

Oh, Time... sweet Lady Time... can be...

Rewritten.

What a dangerous word.

Damn it all-maybe yes, maybe no-fuck the odds.

“*Scourgify!*” My suit was coming out pretty clean of all the mud and blood. Back in Fleur’s bathroom, I met her gaze in the reflection of the mirror. “If you’re coming with me, and I think you should – for both our sakes – then you’ll need to pack a bag.”

Fleur nodded, yet made no move to walk away.

“*Scourgify.*” The hardest part to clean was always the silk shirt – getting the blood out of it – but when I shrugged on the jacket it would hide the discolouration. Still, I had to stop buying expensive shirts. Sure they felt good, and breathed well, but I only ended up ruining them. And with the days to come... I would be better off buying torn rags to start with. That thought made me smile.

Smiles are worth more than gold in my trade.

“It’s getting harder, isn’t it?”

Fleur seemed startled by my question. “*Excusez-moi?*”

“To pretend this isn’t happening.” I finished with my suit, it was as clean as it was going to get, and turned to face the French beauty. Fleur was more of a goddess than Saturnia, damn her demon heart, would ever be. “To see the world as a safe place.”

“You want me to come with you.” Fleur was torn.

I could tell she had no idea what to do – to come with me meant a quest for Atlantis, the threat of Death Eaters and Dark Lords. To stay, without my protection and super-duper demon fighting powers, to turn away from me, could mean death if my enemies went after her, as promised. I always, *always* put the people I care for in this situation. It’s the way of my world.

With my face clean of blood, my smile was a lot easier, a lot less terrifying. “I promise it’ll be a lot of fun. I know, after that thing with Gringotts, you were probably hoping to relax for awhile.” I chuckled. “That can still happen, good times ahead, it’s just that other things are happening this summer as well.”

“Like demons and death threats, assassinations and time-travel?” Fleur took a step closer to me. Her bare feet and legs were still flecked with the mud and grass, her dress was wrinkled and her hair in knots. She looked wild – as wild as a storm, uncontrollable and free. “You want to take me on a true Harry Potter adventure?”

I groaned and rolled my eyes. “If you like...” A breath of laughter escaped me. “Moreover, I want to show you a wonder before its gone forever. Atlantis, Fleur, *Atlantis*. Streets of gold, spires that scrape the sky, flying ships – just like the story. You believe, even if you don’t think you do.” I paused. “Everyone believes, on some level, because everyone has seen it.”

“What does that mean?”

I leaned back on the sink. “Come with me and find out.”

Fleur’s sudden grin was as fierce as it was heart-pounding. “You think you can *tempt* me, ‘Arry?”

“I-” At her smile – so beautiful, so alluring – every drop of manly testosterone in my body burned past boiling point. I blushed red. “Damn. Well-played...”

Fleur nodded to herself, confident in her attraction. I guess the threat of hellish demons being set loose against her didn’t hold as much sway during the warm summer’s light streaming in through the high windows. “What of this assassination you are supposedly guilty of perpetrating?”

I shrugged. “Auror Pedont said it was in Paris, didn’t he, that I did it?” Fleur nodded. “Then, as soon as you’re ready, we leave the country.”

“You are sure we can do nothing? If we went to Paris and warned—”

“If I go to Paris then I’m either going to end up actually killing this man, your President for Magic, or I’m going to make it look like I did.” I shook my head. “And that’s already the case, if those Aurors are to be believed. No, someone’s playing games in the shadows for now, and if I had to guess I’d say it’s our new friend Chronos. He

threatened you to keep me on the path to Atlantis, perhaps he..." I trailed away.

Fleur followed my trail. "Perhaps he 'as set ze authorities after you to make sure you don't stray from your path to Atlantis. Perhaps he 'as framed you. A leetle insurance, if I am not enough. Still, to *assassinate*... you deal with dangerous men, 'Arry."

"He's not a man," I said. "And you are more than enough."

I didn't elaborate on either statement there. Fleur didn't ask.

As for Saturnia and Chronos, if this assassination was their work, and I had a feeling it was, then it added a whole new dimension to whatever they were. I may as well call them demons, for lack of a better word – I certainly wouldn't think of them as gods – and I had my suspicions that freakin' *Voldemort* was more human than either of them.

What was it Chronos had said to me?

"That if you don't take up my gift, that if you turn aside from Atlantis – as you might, oh yes, yes – I will send more Bone-Men and worse after this young lady here." Chronos winked at Fleur. "I will end her existence, just as surely as your Dark Lord Voldemort would. You changed this game, Harry James Potter, you challenged fate, and now here is how the board is set."

I hadn't taken up his gift – the sword that looked like the long hand of a clock – and now it was lost seven or so hours into the future. I wasn't great with a sword. Sure, I knew how to use one, just not overly well. Fuck it, my wand and my edge were all I needed.

And maybe a few more of those Atlantean runes, in case Chronos makes good on his threat. The runes were in my head, a few I could call from memory, others were blurred and just on the tip of my tongue. Once I got where I was going from Fleur's house, to somewhere relatively safe, I'd sit down and sketch out as much of the Old-World magic as I could.

It could be handy for wards, at the very least, maybe even against Tweedledum and Tweedledee – the Orc-mare, as Chronos had named them. I'd remember that, names were powerful things.

"We have to get going, Fleur, because we're going to be back from Carcassonne soon." I stood up straight, pocketing my wand. "Pack a bag – just the essentials – few changes of clothes and shoes. Don't be too particular, we'll be picking up a lot as we go."

I started to rush Fleur out of the bathroom, the confidence in my step swift and sure.

"But where are you going? Where are we going?" Fleur asked.

I grinned – a gentle, innocent smile. "Have you ever tried a New York Hot Dog?"

"New... New York? America, 'Arry!"

I nodded. "Katz's Delicatessen on East Houston Street griddles the tastiest, snappiest dollar-twenty-five hotdog in town."

If Saturnia hadn't have stabbed me, I would've been there half a day ago. The United States... I was behind schedule – I was hours and minutes behind schedule. Hours were important, and minutes doubly so.

"That sounds quite horrible," Fleur said.

I laughed. I had promised Fleur adventure, but she hadn't let me forget that it was *her* choice to come with me. *Tempt her, indeed.* I hoped, I really hoped, that she would not end up regretting that choice. She would though, she always does, even if she thinks I never see it.

Before I was done, Fleur would be a warrior in her own right – because that's what I did, at the end of the day, to those who fought with me. I turned them into warriors against the monsters. Some would argue I turned them into monsters in their own right.

Some would be right.

Maybe yes, maybe no...

Fleur was coming with me. I felt a rush of pure joy and excitement as she disappeared down the hallway and up the stairs to her room, in order to pack. Despite all that had happened, everything that had gone differently – stab wounds and demons – she was still coming with me.

I could feel a sense of crackling urgency in the air all mixed up with a sense of familiarity – this was new and exciting, being with Fleur, and yet it had all happened before.

“Time...” I whispered to no one and nothing, save myself and my merciless headache. A thought came to me then, amidst my own youthful folly (same mistakes, new ways) and I spoke it aloud. “She always dies first...”

Fleur always dies first.

I knew that to be true. Of all my lives and all my times... I’m always the last. And this time, I had to break the cycle. Because all bets were off – I felt that down to my very bones.

So Fleur and I have met before, lives and lifetimes ago, if only she knew it – and perhaps deep down she does, she must, that’s a nice thought – the same souls meeting over and over again, ready to run away together into a big wide world of adventure... and nightmare.

I, Harry James Potter, meet Fleur again and for the first time – her and Nymphadora – and I always hope to beat the long odds, and I always fail... knowing that is the hardest part.

So see me now, as I wait smiling at the foot the stairs, completely aware that, more often than not, Fleur and I, and sweet Tonks, oh we’re bound for oblivion... and yet I can’t look away.

“I can’t look away...” I whisper, almost laughing, still smiling.

Not much to be said for that... except maybe that the odds are long, life’s unfair and death’s no better.

But you know what?

Fuck the odds.

A/N: There we go - poor Harry - he's insane and smiling and has no idea at all what's going on. Shorter chapter, as I said, because I won't even get a look at the next one for two weeks or so because of the amount of uni work I've got. Why oh why did I ever go back. Thanks, folks, please review - I did good?

Chapter 12 – Baby, Do You Remember When?

Part Three – The Thief

*So I handed him my bottle, and he drank down my last swallow.
Then he bummed a cigarette and asked me for a light.
And the night got deathly quiet, and his face lost all expression.
He said if you're gonna play the game, boy, ya gotta learn to play it
right...*

--Kenny Rogers

*'I asked one draught of earlier, happier sights,
Ere fitly I could hope to play my part.
Think first, fight afterwards, the soldier's art;*

One taste of the old time sets all to rights...'

Not my words, not by far.

Not even my story.

And yet, so fucking apt.

It was 15:13 and *twenty-two* seconds.

As I gave Fleur five minutes to shower and make ready to leave, I tried to repair the shattered wrist watch I'd bought off a desk clerk in Tivoli only a day ago, give or take a few jaunts back and forth with the Time-Turner. A simple *Reparo* wasn't doing the job, yet I was quite adept at the small mechanics of things.

I had to be to survive.

The memories of the future, however befuddled they were, had information on practically everything, save the new stuff of today. One thing my older, deader selves had learnt in their many lives and many failures was the use and extent of magic...

I had learnt how to shatter Time, bend thought, subdue armies using magic – more importantly, I had learnt how to do without.

So I sat at the foot of Fleur's carpeted mahogany staircase, the back of my steel watch pried-off and its delicate workings revealed to the world. I'd exposed the top plate, no doubt voided the warranty, and saw that the ratchet wheels seemed to be in place... no fault there. Some of the little screws were loose, and the top pivot band was bent – there was my problem.

It would take some intricate magic, just a feather's touch of power, to stretch it back into shape. I marvelled at the knowledge in my head, from other lives. I'd never seen the inside of watch before, not in this life, and yet I knew the workings of such a device as if I'd been repairing them all my life.

The spring in the main cog was also distorted. I set about undoing the damage and a few minutes later clicked the back plate back into place. In the quiet of the house, below my steady breathing, the soft - *tick-tick-tick* of clockwork emanated from my watch. A job well done.

I smiled a content smile; all too fucking pleased with myself, and wound the watch to the correct time. I thought about it and then set it for 09:23 on the dot, as the minute ticked over in my head. It was approaching half-three here in France, yet next stop was New York, and the time there was six hours ago.

Fleur was taking her time, but that was okay – we had about twenty-five minutes to get out of here before our past-selves showed up from Carcassonne – I made sure of my belongings in my special briefcase as I waited. The leather and brass grips had both been tarnished through flame and folly since the goblins had given it to me.

Okay, contents:

Invisibility Cloak?

Check.

One-half of Voynich Manuscript from beneath Mt. Everest?

Check.

About one million pounds in varying Muggle currencies?

Check.

Forged Muggle documents – birth certificate, passport, and international driver's licence?

Check.

That was the important stuff. It was a good job the briefcase was charmed feather-light.

Oh, and Ring of Concealment?

Check – on my index finger, suppressing my magical signature into one a few years older.

I was all set – just waiting on Fleur.

I glared at the dull band on my finger, marked with a tiny symbol of infinity, the brand of Atlantis, and contemplated the Keys to the Past. It was time, Time, that sealed Atlantis away – that turned a journey into a quest. The Voynich Manuscript was another Key. How many Keys to go? I wasn't sure. Atlantis held the last.

I wanted a smoke, yet all I had were the half a dozen crumpled sticks I'd nicked off Dudley three days ago. Christ, had it only been three days? Three days and a bit if you counted the hours spent back and forth on account of the time-turner.

Regardless, I needed a smoke. Wizarding cigars were on my to-do list. Along with a few other items of a quest-related nature. No matter what else was happening, Atlantis would consume *months* of my time, and yet I had to be back for September 1st, or else doom Britain to a very dark fate.

Time would have to be stretched – Atlantis could do that, too. Or rather... *Time* could do that, *around* Atlantis.

I heard light footsteps above me on the landing and I glanced up to see Fleur. Her hair was damp from the shower, and she wore a pair of dark denim jeans below a simple white blouse and soft leather jacket. Her boots were thin, and made of a white leather. In one hand she carried a simple luggage case, of Muggle design, yet no doubt bigger on the inside.

She looked great – older, womanly – and brimming with sheer confidence. I felt off-balance in my rumpled suit jacket and scuffed shoes.

I shoved the inadequate, fifteen-nearly-sixteen, thoughts aside. Fleur was a beauty, of that there was no doubt, yet I had certain advantages in the mysterious and intriguing department. I'd also saved her life a handful of times in a matter of days. That made me look pretty awesome, I suppose. Why...?

Because I'm a cowboy... and on a steel horse *I ride*—

"Let's go, then" I said, gazing up at Fleur. "Adventure, and what have you, waits for those stupid enough to want it..." I laughed.

"How do you plan on getting us to New York today?" Fleur replied, composed and elegant as she descended the staircase.

I'd been thinking on that, particularly in light of the whole 'wanted for murder' thing that had fallen on my head. It would be good to be seen leaving France – or rather, leaving Britain, seeing as how legally I was still supposed to be there.

"Bit of Apparatin', bit of portkeyin', sweetheart," I said, offering to take her suitcase. "Let's walk and talk beyond your wards – there's a lot of work to be done."

Thought encompasses time.

Time is relative – time is light. Travel faster than light, and you can go back to a point in time before you left.

Time is light.

Only you can't travel faster than light – not ever.

Speed isn't the key to time travel, not at all.

Thought, on the other hand, thought is very much the key.

Yet it does not exist. Do you understand?

My stitches across my chest were burning. I'd bandaged them up pretty tight to prevent tearing yet the pressure was irritating, and rubbing against the wound I wouldn't be rid of for weeks. Along with my constant headache, I ignored it as best I could.

The afternoon outside of Fleur's family home was as beautiful as it had been the first time around. The sun was warm, the breeze was light, and Fleur's golden hair shone with the radiance of diamonds.

"You know I entered France under a false name, Ethan Rafe," I said, as we walked across the ward line and out into the dusty country lane that meandered through lush meadowlands for some miles towards Carcassonne. "Well, I'm thinking if we dive under the radar back into the U.K., then I can leave again as Harry Potter, straight for the United States."

"You are creating a trail," Fleur replied.

"I know." It was a risk – plans could go awry should Dumbledore or the goblins track me down before I was well and truly set for Atlantis, yet I had a feeling that this time around the risks had to run a little higher. "I know – that's kind of the point."

"Oh?"

"Only Dumbledore is aware that I'm not in England where I should be. With this whole assassination of the French President for Magic going down, I'd prefer to leave a trail of paperwork that shows me leaving

Britain legally, hopefully before the assassination takes place, and arriving legally by portkey in the United States. Time and dated.”

Fleur thought through my reasoning, and couldn’t fault it. However, she knew more than most about my dealings over the last few days, and had been with me at Gringotts on that first day of Waking Up...

“The goblins will know where you are, and zat information may cause problems. They were ready to kill you for all your talk of Atlantis ze other day.”

I nodded. “Yep – them and how many others? – you’re frowning, why?”

Fleur took a second to present the argument I knew was coming. “President Laurent is a good man, ‘Arry, I ‘ave met him once or twice... My father is his friend. How can we let him die?”

“You want me to try and stop it?” My tone was neither frustrated nor deadpan, but vaguely curious.

“How can you not even try, knowing his fate?”

That was a fair enough question. “Because it’s already happened. Don’t you see?”

“It might not ‘ave, if we use your Time-Turner to go back and simply warn ze Aurors.”

It was hard to get one’s head around, I suppose. I’ve had lifetimes to understand Time, and in all honesty I can say that I still don’t. Better than most, but that doesn’t make me an expert, not by far. Still, Time was mine – I knew what I could and couldn’t do, for the greater good.

“You said time could be rewritten—”

“Not without paying a price,” I snapped, a little too harshly. “Not without a sacrifice. Listen Fleur, time travel is a terrible business – it doesn’t work properly, never will – and the chain of events, of cause and effect, always, *a/ways* drips with someone’s blood.”

My blood – your precious blood, Fleur. Damn it all to hell and back. I hated having to lie, but if I told Fleur the truth now – that I could, in fact, save the life of this man, Thomas Laurent, all it would cost was three days and one of my many throwaway-deaths, would she even try to understand?

No, she'd be simply horrified.

And I wasn't guaranteed another shot at saving the world this time around. I felt that in my very bones, in the air and in the passing of every lost second. I was barely staying alive and afloat as it was, what with Saturnia and Chronos breaking the flow as I knew it. If I were to die, and go back, not only would it hurt beyond pain, but I'd put myself three days behind my newest enemies.

They knew Time as I did – and as the rules didn't apply to me, with my knowledge of times to come, neither did it apply to these would-be gods. I couldn't afford another death, not even a moment of lost time – I was, I suppose, as mortal as the next man.

"Was it just mere 'appenstance zat found you outside Gringotts in time to save my life, 'Arry? Or did you know the future and change it?"

The question surprised me, as Fleur had never made the connection before, not in any of the lives and times I could remember through the maelstrom of *burning* memory. Surprised me and stumped me.

I let the moment stretch on a touch too long, floundering for a suitable reply. "I was just there by chance," I said, and the look Fleur gave me said, quite clearly, that she was not convinced. "Look, if a Time-Turner could fix this, don't you think the Aurors themselves would use one to stop the President's death?"

Fleur paused to think about that. I saw a reluctant acceptance of time and fate slide across her face. She nodded. "*Oui*, you 'ave a point," she said quietly.

"If there was anything I could do, I'd do it, but right now we have to get moving – as far away from France as possible. This whole side of the world isn't going to be too friendly towards me after tonight."

Fleur smiled, a touch wistfully. “And what of me? Travelling with a wanted fugitive? What shall I tell my parents?”

“Those Aurors tonight are going to think I’ve kidnapped you, aren’t they?” That was something I hadn’t considered yet. “Well, we don’t want to worry—”

An alarm bell started ringing in my head. I turned back toward the château just in time to see Fleur and myself appear barely fifteen feet away, loaded down with shopping bags from Carcassonne, just outside of the ward line.

“Oh shit...” I whispered, stifling a chuckle. *Time’s up...*

Next to me, Fleur’s jaw dropped. Acting fast, I clutched for her forearm and Disapparated as silently as I could, before Time proved me wrong on the limits of the Time-Turner and I tore a hole in the fabric of reality. Fucking paradoxes... paradox*i*?

Whatever the plural is, bumping into myself without expecting it, changing the past like that, could quite literally explode in my face. It had happened before, lives and lives ago when I’d tried to do exactly what I’d just told Fleur I couldn’t.

Alter the past with a Time-Turner... back when I was young and stupid and far too quick to die. Oh, damn it all.

Paradox equals bad.

I’d Apparated too suddenly to be able to bypass the international border wards that formed a tight net around most nations on the face of the planet. Fleur was squeezed tight against me as we landed barely half a mile away in the same field I’d appeared in twelve or so hours ago, accounting for the Time-Turner, gutted and bleeding.

“Did you see us?” I asked Fleur, as she righted herself and her suitcase from the emergency-transportation. “I really am a little weedy thing – what’s a girl like you hanging around a guy like me for?”

Fleur recovered fast. “Ze thrill and excitement,” she said, deadpan, straightening her jacket and hair. “So zis afternoon, upon *our* return from Carcassonne, we were standing behind... ourselves, *oui*?”

I could never be sure about that. It’s hard to view Time as anything but a straight, linear line. A purpose of sequential events moving a relative individual from A to B. Yet what came first, the chicken or the egg? Time was more of a sphere than a line. For the sake of time-travel as the Time-Turner would have it...

“I guess so,” I said. “Hard to fathom, isn’t it?”

“Very much so.” Fleur chose to smile. “What is in America, ‘Arry, that you would ‘ave me come with you?”

The meadowlands were warm and inviting, peppered with golden buttercups and soaked in sunlight. I was tempted to sit down and rest, take another sweet five minutes out, yet there was no time – not anymore. It had been a long day, with long months to go.

“Honestly not much,” I said. “There’s a man there, and a woman, who will be accompanying us to Atlantis. Most of the supplies necessary to last us the trip can be bought while we’re there, then we have to come back to this part of the world – to Europe, and lost, lovely Latium...” *Where we sometimes, if I’m lucky, pick up a certain shape-shifting Auror.*

I’d given Tonks a note explaining as much on my first day back.

“A day or two in America?”

I nodded. “Three at the most. It shouldn’t stretch on more than that.”

“I will ‘ave to Owl my parents as soon as we arrive. I don’t want them finding out through ze Aurors zat you ‘ave kidnapped me. My father, in particular, will be most wrathful.”

“Not a good first impression,” I agreed with a nod.

Fleur quirked a single perfect eyebrow. “Oh, so you are looking to make a good impression with my father? I see...”

I ran a hand back through my unruly hair. A memory came to me, of witnessing the aftermath of a Death Eater attack on the Delacour château, once upon a time. Fleur's family, her mother, father, and sister Gabrielle, slaughtered and sacrificed to my arrogance.

"Ah, I frightened you, no?" Fleur said, her radiant face eclipsing the very sun. "You look lost for words... Imagine that, 'Arry Potter defeated by soft teasing."

I didn't deserve such kindness – I never would. Monsters inevitably destroy such a good thing.

"We should get moving," I said, with false cheer. "As lovely as this scene is, buttercups and a pretty girl, we're *leagues* behind Voldemort and barely running parallel with Chronos' crowd. Can't forget our enemies, can we?"

That last was almost wistful. I laughed.

I had a moment to prepare for this next Apparation, and seeing as how it was across the Channel and through two border-networks of wards, as well as side-along, I made sure not to screw it up.

"Onward we fare, Mademoiselle Delacour!"

Our forms shimmered and faded as I subverted the Apparation wards surrounding two countries and slipped back into Britain. We faded entirely from the south of France, leaving naught but bent blades of grass to mark our passing.

There's smoke. A lot of smoke.

Who'll be still standing when it clears?

International portkeys had to be booked weeks and sometimes even months in advance. A direct breach into a foreign territory from an illegal portkey caused no end of hassle and paperwork, as well as a

loss of face for the country of origin, and as such travel was heavily restricted by the Ministry.

Unless you knew how to make them – like Dumbledore – in which case the Ministry, the Department of Magical Transportation, had a blanket ward across the entire United Kingdom to immediately detect and dispatch a troop of highly-trained hit-wizards to trace or even stop the use of the portkey.

Unless you knew how to fool such detection wards – like Dumbledore – in which case anywhere in the world was pretty much a stone's throw away.

Not unlike Dumbledore, I knew how to make portkeys.

The goblins could make them with their own particular brand of magic and those weren't detected by the Ministry. Well, they were, but the Ministry turned a blind eye as per the accords of the Fourth Great Goblin Rebellion of the... thirteenth century? Yeah, I think so.

Of course if you're willing to pay through the teeth for one, an international portkey can be arranged in a matter of moments from the posting just south of Dover along the archaic, chalky white cliffs breaking the sea. Ministry owned and operated – PORTUS (The PORTkey Under-Station) was all legal, all above board, and all *recorded*. That was the most important part of my devious plan.

It was here that Fleur and I had successfully infiltrated the United Kingdom. It felt good to be briefly home, gazing out at the soft grey sea and breathing in the heavy, salty limestone rolling in off the cliffs. Usually it was a month or so before I managed to get back on native soil, yet circumstance had demanded another road this life around.

And, if I'm being honest, I didn't want to spend much time back home just yet. Not until my headache abated (if it would this time) and my memories worked themselves into some sort of order. The ground of this small island is soaked in blood, of the past and of the *future*. I'd seen so many people die here, under British sky, time and time again. No, I had few fond memories of this part of the world...

“A nice view,” Fleur said, as we walked along the outskirts of the coast, the English Channel away to our right and a slight drop of about seventy feet to the frothy swell below.

I nodded. “Clear enough day.” In my mind, I saw the sky aflame, scorched like burnt caramel mixed with toxic clouds of sickly-green vapour falling like rain. The world’s end. “You can just make out the French coast. See it?”

“*Oui*, ‘Arry.”

The Portkey Terminus appeared, from the outside, as nothing more than a dilapidated warehouse surrounded by rusted wire fences and overgrown shrubbery. There was a neon yellow sign that looked shiny and new bolted to the fence – it read:

WARNING

DANGER OF DEATH

A little caricature of a tiny silhouette-man being struck by a black bolt of electricity completed the warning to stay away. If that failed, there were a hefty amount of Muggle-repelling charms surrounding the facility. They hummed in my mind like the buzzing of a bee, beneath the pounding of the memories...

There was a steady stream of traffic going in and out of the building, visible to those magical folk that could see it. It was the summer holidays so every other wizarding family was either going away or coming back, and this led to a surplus of travellers entering the cavernous foyer of the warehouse, as well as the usual travellers portkeying to and fro.

Bright, mighty lights hung from the high-ceiling, spheres of burning magical fire, and dozens of luggage bags and suitcases floated at knee-height, or were lumped on weighted-down house elves tottering back and forth.

I tried to blend in, yet Fleur alone stuck out like a rose among weeds. Her icy cool stare and high chin deflecting more than a few lingering

looks. There was a fair swath of people who recognised the famous Harry Potter, as well, for much good I could do them at the moment.

Inside PORTUS the dilapidated façade disappeared under the more traditional heavy brickwork of the wizarding world, similar to Diagon Alley and the Ministry. Slabs of green marble paved the floor and there were two main thoroughfares – one for Arrivals, and another for the Departure lounge beyond check-in and ticket purchasing.

“You attract the strangest looks, ‘Arry,” Fleur said, as we headed towards the check-in desks just before the security check points on the far side of the foyer.

“You’re attracting a fair amount of attention yourself,” I replied.

“*Non*,” Fleur said, shaking her head. “The looks I attract are simple to understand – amazement, lust, even misguided *love*. The veneer of a certain charm, a leetle jealousy from ze other women.” She paused. “The looks you attract, ‘Arry, are...”

Almost automatically people were getting out of our way, clearing a path out of the way of the ‘Chosen One’ as the *Prophet* had dubbed me, and the stunning French beauty by my side.

“Go on,” I said.

“These people are afraid of you.” Fleur scanned the crowds. “Or, afraid *for* you.”

I nodded in understanding. “They’re afraid of who I should be.” I’d seen it before – oh many, many times. Too many times. I think I’d had this conversation before, in another time, another place. *Another world, another life...*

“And who iz zat?”

“Voldemort’s nemesis.” I chuckled. “That charming hero we’re looking for.”

“Ah, I see.”

I think Fleur was beginning to see just how dangerous I was – if the Bone-Man and demon entourage hadn't done that already – and kind of liked it. Both of us were old enough to know better yet too young to care. As for these strange looks I was attracting...

If I was being honest to myself, then I was half-expecting the looks to transform into shock and fear as the word spread that I was wanted for murder or assassination or whatever. Yet either it hadn't happened yet, or word hadn't spread. Bullshit frame-jobs aside, with the way my week was going I was fully expecting something unlikely to bite me in the arse.

I was pleasantly surprised to bypass two Aurors on duty without incident and approach the check-in counter, Fleur still at my side and a smile on my face.

"Hey there," I said to the mature woman behind the desk, a pointed black hat sitting atop her strawberry curls. The silver letters on her golden name badge read: *Sara*.

The woman's smile faltered and her eyes flickered from me to Fleur, where they widened, back to me again and up to my scar. Her mouth formed a tiny 'o' before she could stop it. "Good afternoon," she stammered.

"And to you," I replied, aware of the streams of people moving behind and around me. I kept half my focus searching for Death Eaters, for demons, for anything in between. "Hope you can help us today. Fleur and myself," I gestured to the French witch, "need a portkey to the States as soon as possible."

"Oh my, a holiday?" the woman, Sara, asked. "You don't have a reserved ticket?"

"Unfortunately not. I was hoping to jump on the next available ring – if it needs to be widened, I'm willing to pay first-rates to save time."

Sara's stance softened with relief. "In that case, I'm sure we can arrange something within the hour. Mr. Potter, isn't it?"

"It is – and this here is Fleur Delacour, my *very* legal travel guardian."

“Bonjour.” Fleur inclined her head.

It was a simple process, really, yet without Fleur I would have been refused passage – being underage and all. The security check-point was yet to come, too.

“Here are two travel-permits to the United States – if I can get you to fill them out whilst I see what’s available, yes? – I think there’s a four-thirty to Washington that can be widened...” She trailed away, shifting through a packet of documents with her wand, and turning to one of her colleagues along the long counter.

Five minutes and two three-month holiday permits into the United States later, Sara beamed and told me it would be three hundred and twenty galleons to get us on a five o’clock portkey ring to Springer Mountain, Georgia, United States, Planet Earth. The location didn’t matter so much so long as it was close. I just hoped the paperwork wasn’t lost – it didn’t hurt to have a back-up if, *when*, this political assassination charge came back to haunt me.

“The charge can be credited against your Gringotts vault, Mr. Potter, if you can just fill out this slip...”

More paperwork – brilliant. This little slip was going to set every alarm bell in the goblin nation ringing. The little blighters would know I was in America before the day was out. Couldn’t be helped. I thanked the witch behind the counter, signed away three hundred galleons, and Fleur accepted two pieces of official-looking parchment in return.

We had our tickets, I was back on the grid, and the portkey left in just over an hour and a half.

I remembered to screw the Ring of Concealment from my finger as Fleur and I moved through security into the Departure Lounge. The Aurors on duty scanned our wands (much like in the Atrium of the Ministry), matched it against our magical signatures (I was fifteen-nearly-sixteen no doubt about it), and had us sign another set of clearance papers before we could proceed.

Beyond security we moved into the latter half of the warehouse, which had a large viewing window looking out at the sea beyond the

vast cliffs and rows of generic-cushioned wooden chairs bolted to courtesy tables stacked with dog-eared copies of *Witch Weekly* and the *Prophet*. No matter what world you're in – Muggle or Wizard – airport/portkey terminals are nigh on identical in their blandness.

"We are to depart from Chamber Nineteen, 'Arry," Fleur said, casting an eye across the ticket-parchment. "*Merlin's putáin*, I cannot believe all zis is really 'appening today."

Believe it, baby. "Oh, we're just getting warmed up." I laughed at her expression. "Today is normal, for the most part, the real impossibilities are to come." We were near the large long window that covered all of one wall, stretching away to the far end of PORTUS. "It's a normal day out there, the sky is blue, the sea is choppy... Atlantis, though, is most certainly not normal. The sky is torn, the sea is dry – Atlantis is magic unleashed and untamed."

Perhaps I should have felt guilty at the all-too-subtle manipulation, but I didn't.

Heathen gods, Chronos had whispered. Yes, yes...

"Where did your knowledge of Atlantis come from, 'Arry? How do you know what you are doing?"

Heh, did I know what I was doing? Barely, barely at all and no, not at all. I paused in my reply, looking into Fleur's eyes, and for a moment saw her on fire, her eyes bursting onto scorched cheeks and her platinum-blond hair slick with her blood-my blood-and blue flame. People scream in a death like that – long and hard and *forever* in a second.

I opened my mouth to reply—

"Harry?" A familiar voice. "Harry!"

Fleur and I turned on the spot and there was Neville Longbottom, striding towards us in simple black robes, his bouncy light hair longer than I remembered and a goofy grin on his face.

"Neville," I said, genuinely pleased, and offered him my hand.

My head throbbed as I tried to recall the last time I'd seen him. Fifth-year, the Hogwarts Express, barely a week or two ago, but then... it had been years. Years after he'd taken a Killing Curse to protect Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones from death... just one way Neville had gone out over the aching lifetimes in my head.

He always died in style. That was something, I suppose. Some people aren't meant to do anything less.

Some people aren't meant to grow old either.

"How are you?" Neville asked, glancing at Fleur and blushing.

"Heh, well," I said. "I'm... *well*. You remember Fleur, from the Tournament?"

Neville nodded. "H-hi."

"*Bonjour*, Neville," Fleur said, and stepped closer to kiss him first on one cheek, and then the other.

I was always a little put-out by that. Fleur hadn't kissed my cheeks when I'd come stumbling and bleeding into her yard some... fifteen, sixteen hours ago. I was being an idiot. Felt odd that it was still the same afternoon. Time-turners are funny like that.

Neville seemed to swoon and blink an awful lot as Fleur retreated, a knowing smile on her face.

"So, you're off somewhere for the summer?"

Neville nodded, looking embarrassed. "With my Gran. We're going to Spain for a few days to see my Uncle Algie. Ever since the Ministry came out and admitted that You-Know-Who's back, he's been Apparating off to the continent looking for a troll-dealer. You know, for protection."

I snorted a laugh. "A troll? Wow."

"Yeah..." Neville shrugged. "How about you, Harry? Where are you going?"

“America, actually, on business.”

“Business?”

“He means we are going to find ze lost city of Atlantis, don’t you, ‘Arry?” Fleur said, tilting her head to one side and pursing her full lips.

Oh, ha ha... I would’ve returned fire, but Neville’s grandmother chose that moment to appear as if from nowhere, trailed by a wobbling stack of suitcases which were levitated by a very pale house-elf with large, light blue eyes.

“Gran,” Neville said. “You remember Harry Potter – and this is Fleur Delacour.”

Although she wasn’t physically intimidating, Neville’s grandmother held herself as a strong and powerful woman, capable of dealing with Death Eaters or worse. Her face was old, cracked with lines, and powdered heavily. She wore a fox-fur scarf above solid green robes and that impressive hat topped with a stuffed vulture.

“Ah yes,” she croaked, grasping my forearm. “Neville tells me the pair of you gave those traitorous Death Eaters a run for their worthless skins at the Ministry. Just like my poor Frank and your dear father in their day.”

I wanted to break free of her grasp but I didn’t think I could. “Neville saved me a lot of pain and my life that night, ma’am,” I replied. My memories were murky at best of the Department of Mysteries. I could recall Sirius dying with pretty good clarity.

“Excellent, simply excellent, boys,” the old woman crowed. “And Mademoiselle Delacour, I trust your father is well? How fare’s the French Ministry?”

“*Oui*.” Fleur smiled, yet I caught it falter. No doubt she was thinking of President Laurent, who would be dead soon, if not already. I knew her father was a consultant on his staff, as well as patriarch of one of the oldest families in France. “Both are well.”

“Come, dear, you must have more than that. Tell me if we can expect that handsome man back on our soil soon.” Gran Longbottom detached her vice-like grip from my arm and seized Fleur’s, marching her over to the seating in the lounge. “Come along, Milky.”

The extremely pale-skinned house elf followed Neville’s Gran and Fleur, levitating their luggage before him, and leaving me with Neville and commiserations for Fleur.

“You have an albino house-elf named Milky?”

Neville shrugged, and smirked a little. “That elf’s older than I am. Probably out-live us all – him and Gran.”

To that I could only slowly nod.

“So how are things really?” I asked a moment later.

Neville was eyeing Fleur and his Gran from a distance, leaning against the giant window behind us. “Well, I’m not travelling with *Fleur Delacour*, Harry, but things are okay. I got a new wand – cherry and unicorn hair.”

“Cool.” I hadn’t anticipated running into anyone I knew this early in the summer, and with what was to come... Neville presented an opportunity. “Listen, Nev, I’m probably going to be in the papers and such over the next few days – and not for all this *Chosen One* stuff.”

“I was wondering about all that,” he said carefully. “You really going to face You-Know—

“Voldemort,” I cut in, and to his credit Neville’s eye was the only thing that twitched. “And yes, no sense hiding it, I’m going to challenge Voldemort, and I’m going to kill him.”

There followed a heavy few seconds, pregnant to the point of bursting, which hung in the air as Neville digested the scope of what I promised. “Good,” he said after the air had cleared. “Good. He could do with some killing.”

From what I could recall of Neville, as mixed up as my memories were, a year ago he would have cowered from the mere prospect and mention of the Dark Lord's name. Neville Longbottom had really come into his own over our fifth-year at Hogwarts.

He'd had to, we all did.

We all changed.

Hell, there was a vast difference between who I am, and who I used to be three, nearly four, days ago. Neville was closer to *my* end of the spectrum than most – in part due to his parents' fate, and the fact that the monsters that may as well be called their *murderers* were on the loose – committing all the old crimes on a new generation.

"I'm going to kill them, Neville, I'm going to kill them all." Slowly. "For my parents, for yours... for my own *fucking satisfaction*." That felt good – it always felt good to say that. "You with me?"

What a thing to ask someone. Yet Neville could understand the *why* and the *how* behind my god-awful question. I don't doubt he's imagined killing Bellatrix Lestrange more than once. Sometimes it was the only justice the innocent could be afforded.

He nodded, God damn it all, Neville nodded. As I had known he would. His jaw, still carrying vestiges of his chubby years, was set hard.

I grinned. "Then listen closely, because there's work to be done..."

I proceeded to lay out a few plans and bits and pieces of plans that would come into play later in the summer, and once Hogwarts started again after September 1st. I warned him not to believe anything he read in the papers about me over the next few days, not elaborating on the assassination I was being framed for, and to expect owl post before the end of the month.

It wasn't much longer after that that his portkey to Spain was set to leave, and he departed with a brief farewell and a contemplative look on his face, folded into his brow. I'd sworn him to secrecy, especially when it came to Ron, Hermione, and Ginny – I had plans for those

three, too. I'd be sending more than a few letters over the weeks to come.

"You look relieved to be free of Gran," I said to Fleur, as she joined me once again by the window. Our portkey still wasn't for the best part of sixty minutes.

"*Merde*, that woman could gossip as ze world fell apart around her."

"Oh, don't tempt fate," I said, chuckling. But it wasn't funny. Why wasn't it funny?

Because it had happened... I shook my head clear of some pretty terrible memories. My headache was worsening – I wasn't feeling well. My stitches were burning a hole in my side... No, wasn't feeling well at all.

In fact I felt like shit.

What time was it? Heh, hell, I realised with a start that I didn't know, and had to look at my watch. That alone scared me more than demons or madmen, Bone-Men or Orc-Mare, descending upon the world.

I'd set my watch to New York time. Doing the math, local time was 16:01 and *forty-two* seconds.

How often do I feel that strange perception, beyond mere words to explain, that reality has shifted... that nothing was as it had been.

That nothing was as it should be.

At a quarter to five Fleur surrendered our tickets to the attendant at the door of Chamber Nineteen, on the opposite side of the Departure Lounge from the long, panoramic window.

International mass-portkey travel was a simple process, really. Along with fifty other people all heading for the United States we filed into a plain stone room, floored with that same heavy marble that covered the whole facility. The room was bare save for a chalky limestone dais that supported a large, thin ring of wood, grooved with brass-iron hand bars – the Portkey – which had been extended to fit in two extra passengers. A simple bit of magic, yet they'd charged me three hundred galleons for it.

Who was the idiot?

Fleur and I stayed to the back of the group, away from the families with children, the floating mass of suitcases and luggage, some supported by two or three tiny house-elves, and away from the glances we had been attracting for the last hour and a half.

We each gripped one of the brass handles when instructed and as the clock on the wall and the clock in my head (which I was maintaining with a dogged diligence) I felt a familiar old tug behind my navel and we were off.

There. Mission Accomplished.

I'd left a paper trail that would hopefully help to exonerate me from any wrong-doing in a political assassination, and in so doing I had alerted the Ministry (which meant Death Eaters, which meant Voldemort, which meant darkness and murder), Dumbledore (which meant the Order of Phoenix, which meant worry for my friends), and no doubt the Goblins (which meant bounty hunters after my head, which meant more fighting, more killing).

Still, can't help but be satisfied with a job well done.

The Portkey lasted a touch longer than average, due to the extra distance travelled outside of the United Kingdom, yet the world spun back into place in a matter of seconds, smelling heavily of springtime and shining as bright as midday – which it very nearly was.

Springer Mountain in Georgia was a beautiful place, warm and humid this time of year. There was a footpath at its summit that extended some two thousand or so miles north towards Maine, known as the

Appalachian Trail. A hiker's dream, six months of near-solitude, with nothing but the adversity and the wide expanses of empty nothing. The way my life was heading, it was beginning to sound like paradise.

A paradise that would burn like so much else if I didn't get my act together.

"Well, here we are, 'Arry," Fleur said softly.

The large portkey-ring, and the fifty or so other travellers complete with luggage and house-elves, had appeared on a similar dais to the one we had just disembarked from. Shrouded within an apparent wilderness of lush green foliage and a canopy of over-hanging trees, we were very much out of sight of the Muggle world.

"Please proceed beyond the landing zone to Disapparate," the polite attendant said, still holding the brass handle of the portkey. "Thank you for travelling with PORTUS, and welcome to the United States of America."

I graciously wheeled Fleur's small case across the mossy earth, holding my special briefcase close in my other hand. The gentle pressure of anti-Apparation wards within the portkey zone always felt a touch oppressive. I had the feeling I could break them, or even circumvent them, but the knowledge was fuzzy and soaked in lifetimes of blood. Easier just to walk.

"An interesting week for both of us, *non*?" Fleur asked, as she stepped lightly down a trail path made of broken pieces of stone. All around us wizards and witches were Disapparating away with loud pops and bangs. "I cannot deny I won't remember my time with you, 'Arry."

I grinned, and with a bit of juggling with my briefcase, managed to slip the Ring of Concealment back onto my finger. I couldn't be Harry Potter anymore. "Bet you wish you could forget that Bone-Man."

Fleur's creamy skin paled a shade. "*Oui* – yes! But I 'ave forgiven you for bringing ze fairytales to life."

“Oh, but I’m not done yet. We still have Atlantis to go – have you ever heard of the Deathly Hallows? – and to round it all off the Fountain of Eternal Life, Avalon, and El Dorado await us.”

Fleur paused. “You jest.”

“For the most part,” I replied. “Here’s good for Apparating – now I know where I’m going, do you mind if I side-along you?”

“*Non*, I suppose not. New York City?”

Actually planning to touch Fleur sent a rush of blood pumping through my heart and into my head, making me feel almost light and dizzy. That might’ve been the concussion talking, though, from the however-many blows to the head I’d taken in the last day and a half (plus stab wound), yet I rather think it might’ve been Fleur, as well.

“New York City,” I confirmed with a nod. “For rest and relaxation – those Aurors kept me up past my bedtime.”

“*Eet iz late*, I suppose,” Fleur said, a soft grin warming her face. “You must be run down to nothing, ‘Arry. Does your side hurt?”

“Only when I breathe.” I chuckled, and gently took Fleur’s delicate hand in my own. “On three then – one, two, two and a half, *POP!*”

One thing I have to credit the Americans on is their integration of magic into the Muggle world. Take New York City, as the example, a city of some eight million people, ninety-nine percent of which have no clue of the wondrous world around them. Despite that, I could Apparate directly into the heart of Times Square and not a one of the Muggles would notice a damn thing.

I did just that.

This wasn’t due to any magical future-knowledge, or super-secret Harry power, but to the Apparation pad set just at the entrance to an alleyway alongside a fairly impressive hotel, of which I would soon be a guest. The Wizarding Congress of the United States had dozens of such Apparation hotspots in use throughout the city, indeed the entire

country, and they were decked out with everything from Notice-Me-Not Charms to Silencing Nets.

Fleur and I had travelled through time, from the idyllic south of France, to the less idyllic but no less charming Dover, to the warm isolation of Springer Mountain, and now directly into the hustle and bustle, the hot stink and noise, of a city that would never sleep.

Fleur crinkled her nose, glancing around at the flashing neon lights, the signboards of Times Square advertising Coca-Cola and the latest Muggle films. Car horns blared, yellow taxis zoomed on by, and the sidewalk was packed with pedestrians who seemed all at once very busy and going nowhere, who paid Fleur and myself no mind at all. I breathed in the noise, the smell of the city – it was life, *alive* and *real*.

“Marvellous place,” I said, stepping clear of the wards surrounding the Apparation point. People began to step around me, grumbling at the inconvenience. I was quite clearly a tourist. Fleur followed, and the crowds forgot about me entirely, gobsmacked at her beauty.

“Quite generous,” Fleur said. “Remind me, why did I follow you, ‘Arry?”

“The promise of the tastiest hotdog in town.” I yawned. “Also my charm, good looks, and winning attitude.”

Fleur shook her gorgeous head. “Three days ago ze world made sense.”

“Tell me about it.” I held my eyes closed for a moment, numbing the memories. “Come on, this is where we’re staying. Very flashy hotel.”

It was a short walk from the Apparation pad. Side by side, Fleur and I entered a tall, very modern glass-fronted building that seemed to lean over us from above. *The Marriott Marquis*. It rose for about fifty floors, scraping the sky. I intended to rape the mini-bar as soon as possible, and not just in my room.

Five minutes later, and after reserving *two* adjoining rooms for the next four nights (just in case, America wouldn’t take that long), I’d checked-in under my false Muggle passport, travelling as Mr Ethan

Rafe, Fleur and I ascended the hotel inside the elevator, heading for floor thirty-nine.

I'd been quite the gentleman in offering Fleur her own room, whilst inside my mind was racing and hoping that the old cliché would fall true and there would only be one available room in this hotel of some two thousand or so rooms. Curse the laws of probability, yet there was only a door separating us in the sleeping arrangements. Oh yeah, my mind was racing.

"Here you are, 'Arry," Fleur said, and handed me a bunch of galleons and sickles, as we rose up alone in the elevator.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"My room – I do not 'ave any Muggle money, yet zat should cover eet."

I offered it back to her. "You really don't have to. It was next to nothing." Honestly, I had about two hundred *thousand* American Dollars in my enchanted briefcase.

"I can pay my own way," she replied, tilting her head to gaze at me. Her calm, cool stare was cruel, beautiful, and unnerving all at once. Damn it all, Fleur could disarm me faster than any dark wizard with a score to settle.

"Well this is way too much," I protested, shaking my fist full of gold.

"You forget, up until very recently I was an employee of Gringotts. Ze exchange rate roughly means my share is three galleons and twenty sickles."

Quite soon, I'd have access to more gold than in all the goblin vaults in all the whole wide world. Yet it didn't feel right taking Fleur's money. Call me old fashioned, call me insane, call me a chauvinistic pig. Fleur wouldn't relent, however, and I just looked foolish resisting. I pocketed the galleons promising myself that I'd offload a Quidditch stadium full of coin on her in return. "Thanks."

"Thank you – I expect ze next few days will prove interesting."

“That they will.”

My room number was 886, and Fleur was 887. There were no keys in such a modern, Muggle building, and I had to show Fleur how to use her swipe card to open the room. I followed her in, wheeling her slight suitcase behind me, and whistled low at the impressive Executive Suite.

Fleur’s room – and I imagined mine would be much the same – was full of sparkling marble bench-tops, soft carpets and mahogany furniture. A desk, a sitting table and entertainment centre, along with kitchen facilities. There was en-suite bathroom of polished white porcelain jutting off from the room containing a large double-bed. New York City shone beyond the large windows, and as high up as we were there was a view for miles across the endless metropolis.

“I must send an owl home soon, ‘Arry,” Fleur said, her eyes on me and not on the room. “Yet I shall let you rest first, before we proceed, I theenk. Zere is still much to discuss between us, as well.”

I nodded slowly, stifling a yawn, and swayed on the spot a little. “You should get some sleep, too, we’ve a busy few days ahead. I promise we’ll go to the wizarding district tonight for an owl – perhaps dinner, too, if you want? Or would it be breakfast to us?”

Fleur shrugged, as if to say it did not matter. “You are dead on your feet, ‘Arry Potter. Go get some sleep before ze next monster attacks. I need you at your best for that.”

It was a joke – yet it wasn’t, and I think Fleur knew it. “Good morning then,” I said, for it still hadn’t hit midday yet. Time-travel... different time-zones... same headache.

“Rest well, ‘Arry.”

“And you, Fleur.”

My room was practically identical to Fleur’s. I tossed my briefcase onto my bed and kicked off my shoes, shrugging off my suit jacket and untucking the silk shirt. I needed some more clothes, and a place

to keep everything that was to come. The shirt still felt a little stifling, so I unbuttoned it completely and took it off.

The bandages that criss-crossed my chest were stained through red with fresh blood, no doubt from a tear in the stitches across my side. "Damn it all," I swore under my breath. Ah well, it could wait.

I took a moment to collect my thoughts and think about what had happened to me in the last few days, what was to come, and what I still needed to do. There was so much. It was overwhelming. I took a deep, shuddering breath, winced at the strain it caused on my magic-proof wound, and let it out slowly.

The latest problem – this assassination nonsense I still knew next to nothing about – needed a moment's attention. Neville Longbottom should understand I didn't do it, as he trusted me and I'd warned him I was about to make the papers again. Yet there was another that might have trouble trusting me, after my deceit and abuse of *his* trust in the *Magnus Fontis*, far beneath the streets of Rome.

The window opened enough to let in the city air, as I drew my wand and muttered a well-known charm. "*Expecto Patronum*." The happy memory I used was seeing Fleur and Tonks again after watching them both die in flame.

My corporeal patronus erupted from my wand, magnificent and absorbed of silver light. It was Dumbledore himself that created this method of communication. "lo, Prongs," I said, tilting my head to the patronus. "Up for a trip? Tell him I'm sorry, would you, and tell him I'm innocent, that there is a lot to explain. Tell him... Harry sends his—love? —best."

The message would be relayed exactly as that, in my voice. I wish I'd done a better job of it. No matter. Prongs had already leapt out the window, a streak of silver in the bright blue sky. Generally speaking, even Dumbledore would have trouble sending a patronus across the Atlantic and all the miles back to England. Yet I had my ways, and I'd given Prongs a little extra boost of magic. He should last long enough to relay the message to old Albus.

I turned away from the window and sat down at the fine desk, pulling a fancy piece of paper printed with the hotel's letterhead towards me, and tapped a ballpoint pen thoughtfully against the leg of the chair. The bed looking inviting, and I could sense the mini-bar away to my left... yet there was work to do – always and forever work to do.

The first rune that came to me was the one I'd used to restrain the Bone-Man. I could almost feel my wand burning a hole in my pocket as I thought of the magic of the Old World, the *protection* of the Old World, and the *destruction*. I'd get some sleep in an hour or two, but for now there was work to be done – I do what I have to do, after all, and I have to walk it all alone.

I was beginning to think that may be a bad thing – not a *wrong* thing – but awfully right for very terrible reasons.

I think my greatest flaw might be that I fight alone – always have done. Other people die, other people get killed, and I can't deal with it. I transcended time and space to undo the future, and yet I keep making the same mistake. And I know it, I do, time and time again, I keep fighting this war mostly on my own.

And look what happens. Yet what choice did I have? What *hope*? I try and I try and this time my best... well, it *has* to be good enough.

Because everything from the bleeding stab wound in my side, to the blazing headache consuming my will to live, told me that this time around all bets were off.

All bets were off.

And the world belonged to the last man standing.

A/N: Next chapter will be here when it's here. A new character or two will be introduced, a battle may be fought, supplies will be purchased. Atlantis is on the horizon.

Chapter 13 – We're Here for Violent Redemption

Part Four – The Warrior

You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em,
Know when to walk away and know when to run.
You never count your money, when you're sittin' at the table.
There'll be time enough for countin', when the dealin's done...

--Kenny Rogers

The madness came easy once I had a chance to sit down and think about it. Rune after rune flowed onto my page (which quickly became pages) as I sat hunched over the writing desk, one hand cupping the wound across my side and the other scribbling down Old World-magic as fast as I could with the blue biro.

Az-reth, I thought, penning a particularly vicious looking rune, all jagged edges and malevolence. Destruction and chaos – blasts of fiendfyre hotter and stronger than what could be conjured these days by a mere wand.

“Az-reth,” I muttered, reminiscing. I'd burned the Ministry to the ground and below once upon a time, using true fiendfyre, summoned through Az-reth. I shuddered at the faux-memory, at the screams of unrealised realities.

After a time, I grew weary of the runes and headed over to the bed, giving a brief glance out of the window at the early afternoon bathing the New York skyline in bright summer light. I fell on the bed with a heavy sigh, wincing at the twinges of pain from my side. The bandages were well and truly bloody, and needed changing – but I was too tired.

How long since I last slept? A day or more? I couldn't remember. How many times had I been knocked on my head and drifted in and out of unconsciousness since then? How much time-travel? The Time-Turner felt like a lead weight around my neck. Too much time-travel.

The pillows were very inviting, as were the warm heavy sheets. I slipped under them with a long, drawn out yawn, thinking I really should have set up some protective wards and runes, but I was simply too tired, too drained. That attitude could get me killed, however, and had done so more than once.

“Frix...bre...néa-suit,” I whispered, scratching a simple rune into the headboard of the bed with my wand. It cut lines of pure white light into the wood.

I felt my concentration waver on the edge of sleep, and the rune faltered, yet with a burst of focus I made it hold, and the light faded, leaving a burnt rune in the shape of a cross within a circle. A lesser rune, a minor protective ward. It would alert me to any magical being, demonic or whatever, within a hundred feet that held negative intentions.

A lot of magic was about intent. Intent was practically the core of the art.

Content that Fleur was asleep in the next room, and safe for the mean time, I let the fatigue wash over me without resistance.

I’d slept only a handful of hours here and there in the last few days and I was tired. Tired to the bone. I had to pause and remind myself that it had only been three days since I awoke at the Dursley’s fresh from the future. My unforgiving headache was testament to the lack of sleep and tumult to the fiery mistakes of other lives.

Sleep was slow in coming and fraught with burnished memories, with dreams of a future to come, of a future long past...

Tomorrow was my twenty-fourth birthday. I had run out of time, not that it mattered, as the world was in ruins – the sky full of ash, the oceans boiled dry, the masses subjugated to flame and blood. It always ended this way.

“You’ll stay with me tonight?” Tonks asked, her face soft and almost innocent. A look I hadn’t seen on anyone’s face in years.

“Of course.” The road before us was barren – the road behind empty of purpose.

It had been bad today. It had been final.

The last of the old guard had fallen to the legions of the Inner Circle – to the demonic carrion Voldemort had leashed and collared in Atlantis. Remus Lupin and Arthur Weasley, unlikely survivors, had tried to liberate a Muggle labour camp. It hadn't gone well... at least they had died quick.

Tonks nodded once, her hair mousy brown and eyes indistinct. “Just wanted to make sure,” she mumbled. “You disappear a lot, you know.”

“Not anymore,” I promise. And the promise can only ring with truth, because tomorrow is July 31st, and time and tide wait for no man. I was going back to the start.

“Are we nearly there?”

It was hard to tell – the landscape had changed so much. Great slabs of earth had buckled, mountains had crumbled, and the Forbidden Forest was reduced to ash or less. Yet I felt close, felt it in my bones. “Nearly there...” I nodded.

Tonks and I crested a rise and all became clear. The dust clung to the sweat on our brows and the blood on our clothes, blowing up and off the valley floor that used to be the lake. I could scarcely recall boating across it with Hagrid for my First Year. It happened, I know it did, but in another life. What remained of Hogwarts clung to parched and arid ground cracked from the heat of the burning atmosphere, and knots of thorny briars grew up to claim the ruins, giving what remained of the castle a malevolence that belonged to the whole world.

“So many died here,” Tonks said, grasping for my hand.

“Many,” I agreed.

Tonks glanced at me sideways, her hair flaring briefly auburn-red with scarcely suppressed rage. “Talk to me, Harry Potter,” she said. “Don’t brush me away with one-word replies...”

I squeezed her hand – hard – and let the life in my eyes shine through. “I’m sorry. You deserve better, Nymphadora, and always will...”

Tonks said nothing for a long moment, and then she reached over to brush my matted hair out of my eyes. She sighed softly. “That damn scar is bleeding again.”

“I know.”

“Does it hurt? Is it burning?”

“No,” I lied. It hadn’t ceased paining me for the best part of five years. Constant, endless burning – night and day – that I’d all but grown used to. “Come on.”

The Scottish Highlands, the Hogwarts grounds, had become a desert. Here and there brief patches of twisted weeds and old petrified wood jutted out of the rock and dust, the sand and broken stone. Dumbledore’s tomb had long since been desecrated and claimed by the unforgiving winds of time. Everywhere I looked memory assaulted me like a hammer blow, leaving me numb and breathless.

“There are no bones,” Tonks said, still gripping my hand for all life was worth. “I thought there would be bones everywhere.”

I shrugged. “Buried or worse,” I said. “I never told you it was me... but I gutted the Ministry with fiendfyre after the Battle of Hogwarts, as retaliation for Ron and Hermione. Killed about four hundred Death Eaters. Voldemort replied in kind and raised an inferius army against me... with the dead from Hogwarts. Everyone was scattered by then...” I paused. “Buried or worse.”

Tonks flinched. “Oh...”

“Yeah.”

The heat was stifling and both Tonks and I were breathing heavily as we ascended the faded steps of the old castle and blasted through the barrier of thorny briars. My wand was rough and abrasive, splintered and near to breaking point. It wouldn't matter much longer, I reminded myself, come midnight...

The Entrance Hall was mostly intact, which is to say it had four supporting walls and a ceiling. It was dark and dusty, piles of heavy ash had buried the floor, and the old grand staircase was caved in under half a castle of stone.

“The fight really is over, isn't it?” Tonks whispered, as if somehow seeing the destruction one last time made it real. “We've lost and there's nothing left to fight for...”

My grip on her hand slackened and slid up to her forearm, pulling her close. “I have not yet begun to fight,” I said, almost growled. I imagined flames burned deep within my emerald eyes, making me look quite insane.

The Great Hall was peppered with shafts of orangey-red light from outside. Two of the four house tables were recognizable, one broken right down the middle, and the tattered house colours on the walls were tangled in the lifeless torch brackets. The Headmaster's chair had toppled into dust. Only five years had passed – the world had moved on.

“I had my first kiss in here,” Tonks said, all of a sudden. She turned to look at me, leaning against the edge of one of the remaining two elongated tables. It held with a weary old sigh. “After hours, Gordon Freedman and I snuck out in fourth-year, searching for the kitchens. I remember there was a storm outside, so we came to watch it in the enchanted ceiling...”

We both looked up into the broken cathedral-like caverns overhead. There was no magic there – just gaping holes, crumbling stone, and above that the tortured sky.

“And then what happened?” I took a step closer, standing just shy of Tonks. I watched a bead of sweat trickle down her throat and below her collar.

“He surprised me,” Tonks said, with a wistful grin. “As I was looking up, he moved in close, and when I looked down...” She pursed her lips, meeting my eyes. “Mwah!”

I chuckled. “Mwah?”

“Mwah is the sound a kiss makes.” She leaned forward and kissed my cheek, pressing her lips down hard and wet.

A rush ran through me, her body was so warm. I turned my head before she pulled away, resting my bloody forehead against her fringe. I nudged her nose with my own. Whether her lips caught mine or mine caught hers didn’t matter as much as her legs coming up underneath me, wrapping around my waist, as I pushed her down against the table.

“Harry...” Tonks gasped.

It was hard, forceful, almost a battle, as our lips met again and again – wet, warm – and our tongues danced. Tonks ran her hands through my hair. My hand cupped her outer thigh, pulling her as close as I could in our fit of blind, yet not completely unexpected, passion. We were the last two alive in the echoing ruins of a place once called home... our guttural, animalistic sounds reverberated up and loud through the cavernous hall.

I pulled away, stoically silent, and reached for my wand. With a silent flick Tonks’ dirty once-white shirt fell away, revealing slightly brown, creamy skin and two mounds of promise concealed within a simple black bra.

“Brave, aren’t you?” she whispered throatily, grasping my thin shirt – already much tattered – and pulling it apart at the seams. My chest was heavily scarred, burned, marked with defeat and death. “Oh... Harry.”

“Hush now,” I whispered, and leaned back down to kiss her neck.

The table creaked ominously beneath us, yet it held. Her skin tasted salty and sweet, hot and dirty. I relished it as a man dying of thirst would an oasis. I was worked up past caring now, of the life and times of Hogwarts and its ultimate demise. I pushed my waist against Tonks, and she responded in kind, opening her legs and pushing right back through the denim and fabric we still wore, intensifying the heat.

The moment stretched on, our efforts became rougher... “I want you. Take me,” Tonks whispered. Words I’d heard before – words I prayed to hear again.

I summoned one of the large and faded Hufflepuff banners from the wall. It was thick and heavy cloth, dusty and dry, yet it would do and I draped it across the house table in a bunch. We both climbed atop of the table proper, stealing kisses and pushing one another with our tongues. Before she fell back onto the drapes, her hair a passionate purple, Tonks had managed to loosen my belt buckle and the top two buttons of my jeans.

Magic hands.

An urgency of need overwhelmed me and I pushed her back, looming above her body breathless and sweaty. Dispensing with magical means, I unlaced her boots and pulled them off. Her socks came next, followed by her jeans. Her panties matched her bra, and I spent the next few minutes simply tracing her body with my mouth, every curve from her neck to the arches of her feet, making her laugh and groan all at once.

My jeans disappeared somewhere in the space between one moment and the next.

“Need you...” I said, low and steady.

Tonks took control, forcing me against the table, and the last of our clothes disappeared. She tore the last piece of clothing I would wear in this life from me with her teeth, and straddled me with a deep, rasping moan that would’ve shook the windows in their frames if they hadn’t shattered years and years ago.

I entered her warm and willing, the strain near-maddening, and my hands found her gorgeous breasts, the nipples hard – the grinding up and down, back and forth, ever harder – and gritty with sweat.

All we were, at that moment, was desire.

“Harry...” Tonks said, clamping her thighs hard against my sides.

The way she said my name, the way she moved, elicited a moan from me that very nearly ended in a whimper. I pulled myself up, thrusting hard, and bit Tonks’ bottom lip, forcing her to retaliate with a groan and an even tighter clamp against me. The pressure was building, the madness was coming...

We rolled on the table, trading places back and forth, all sweaty limbs and low, deep moans of pleasure. I took control back, fighting the inevitable onslaught of guilt and failure that would wrack me in a few hours and eight years ago, and thrust into the woman beneath me again and again.

Every little sound Tonks made, small panting sounds and breathless moans, drove me one notch higher. I could feel the end coming – too soon, far too soon – yet not soon enough. She shuddered beneath me, her breath hitching and strained, and a rush of warmth between us sent me spiralling right over the edge.

I grasped for my wand and, through half-breaths managed to gasp, “Tempus Innoxia!” An envelope of pale green light surrounded our waists, and the greatest spell ever invented (ever) slowed the

biological reactions, the physical pleasure – the breaking orgasm – of our act.

We both lost utter control at the same moment and my thrusts came so fast that the entire table shuddered and cracked. The waves of pleasure hit me, hot and sweaty, as they did Tonks, only it wasn't over in mere seconds... the spell I'd cast prolonged the explosion, eclipsed the mind in sensation, and extended those precious few seconds at the end of love-making into precious few minutes...

Time.

It always comes back to time.

Time is a measure of happiness abound – of happiness only real when shared.

I came and the waves of heated raw pleasure washed over me again and again, and Tonks as well, until the euphoria became indistinct from pure agony and pushed against the fragile bounds of what sanity I had left. Oh, but what a sweet way to lose my mind, caught in the warm, tight grip of the woman beneath me...

I don't know how long it took to recover from the sheer intensity of our act, yet some time later I came back to myself, lying next to Tonks as naked as the day I was born, one of her legs draped over me and her breasts a soft weight against me side. She was breathing heavily, her nose was whistling with soft snores.

I genuinely smiled. There were still half a dozen hours before midnight and the past, and I could think of no better use than to spend them right here, in the grip of one of the two women that could break me.

The end of the world, and the broken promises, was almost worth moment's like these....

I awoke not with a start but with the tired regret of a man who once knew the difference between right and wrong, and honestly couldn't find the strength to care anymore. I slipped back into consciousness

and back into my headache, which pounded my head with renewed vigour, perhaps annoyed that I'd managed to pull a happy, sex-filled, memory from the maelstrom.

The orange glare of sunset filtered in through the large windows across the hotel room, so I guessed I'd been asleep for about three or four hours. I wanted the dream back; I wanted the dream to be a reality... for the most part.

The cascading memories in my head made for the most vivid of dreams.

Sometimes, that worked in my favour (like just now). Most times, my kinder dreams were of things most people can't even imagine into their nightmares.

Either way, I needed to go take a cool shower – and fast. Where was I just now? Right – waking up and stumbling to the en suite bathroom.

I regretted all at once not taking off my bandages and cleaning the fresh blood away from my stab wound when it was still wet. There was a fair amount of blood, and it had dried hard against my stitches. As I peeled off the bandages it felt as if I were peeling out my fine needlework, too.

The white porcelain in the shower's basin soon ran red with chips of my dried blood, and muddy-brown with all the sweat and grime of the last day spent in France. I indulged longer than necessary under the powerful jets of the showerhead, yet the water felt clean – cleaner than I had felt in going on four days now – and my thoughts slipped back into my awesome dream, my once-upon-a-time future...

Nymphadora Tonks... Fleur Delacour – both of them my one weakness and my greatest strength. Forget old magic or new magic or sheer-dogged resolve, those two women hardened my will into something not even Time could break, although that temperamental bitch sure was trying...

The fight wouldn't be worth it without Fleur and Tonks – and the grim satisfaction I got from slaughtering Death Eaters and demons.

After the shower, I gave my stab wound a cursory examination, decided that the stitches would hold, and stole the roll of bandages in the first-aid kit beneath the sink. Modern hotels didn't want guests bleeding all over the place. My one and only pair of clothes – that expensive Armani suit – needed freshening up again. I doubted it would ever return to its original glory, but I'd remedy my lack of luggage soon enough.

It was 18:28 and two seconds – nearly half-six – when I slipped on my wristwatch and pocketed my wand within the folds of my inner-jacket pocket. I wanted to go check on Fleur next, but first my many pages of notes needed to be stored away in the all-too-special briefcase. That took some doing – the briefcase was fit to burst – and I ended up folding the pages in half and stuffing them in behind a stack of fifty pound notes. It wouldn't do for anyone to see those runes – not at all.

The hallway was deserted when I knocked on Fleur's door. I was confident she was okay, as my solitary protection rune hadn't alerted me to any danger, yet it was still a relief to see her open the door, her feet bare and a towel wrapped around her body and hair in that way that only girls can manage.

“’ Arry.” Fleur smiled, her eyes wary. “Tell me we don't ‘ave to run – zat there iz not a monster lurking behind ze flower vase over there.”

“Just checking to see if you're okay,” I said. “I slept the whole afternoon away.”

“Oui – I took a light rest, as well.”

I worked hard to keep my eyes on Fleur's and not on the half an inch of cleavage peeking out of the top of her fluffy white bath towel. I'd won harder battles, and lost easier...

“This hotel has a really good oriental restaurant if you feel like dinner?” I asked, offering her my gentlest smile. “A half hour?”

Fleur took a moment before nodding. “Oui, but we will talk, ‘Arry, over dinner. Trust has brought me zis far with you – no further until you explain yourself.”

Those words had the cool ring of an ultimatum. I had expected as much, and sooner than this. It was a minor miracle that Fleur had thrown in her lot with me back at her family’s château, when the French Aurors wanted to arrest me for the crime of the decade. What to tell her though? The truth? The truth was a terrible thing – maybe just pieces of it. Enough to see her trust renewed, or her distrust distanced.

“You might not like what I’ve got to say.” I settled upon subtle manipulation. If anything, Fleur would push me all the harder now. That was good. I didn’t want her to see the forest for the trees.

“That iz my choice, non?” Her expression softened.

“Aye, I suppose it is.” I gave her a lopsided grin. “We’re about halfway there, you know. To Atlantis, I mean.”

“You would know, ‘Arry.” She was taking that on faith.

I nodded. “Today is July Sixteenth – we’ll be there before the month is out. Wait till you see it.” I chuckled. “It’s wonderful.”

“You will tell me how you know zat over dinner.”

“Well, I suppose I will...”

My last glimpse of Fleur was of tanned, creamy ankles spinning on the spot as she gently closed the door against me. I wandered back down to my room, spinning the access card between my fingers, with a goofy smile on my face at the prospect of another dinner with the stunning Fleur Delacour.

The access card unlocked my room door with a gentle beep, and I stepped back into the decadent suite. All at once I knew I wasn’t alone, as a wave of some fancy... perfume, or cologne, wafted into

my nostrils. There was someone standing in the light of the window, his hands folded behind his back and a mischievous glint in his familiar eyes.

It took my mind a painful second to make sense of what I was seeing, to twist my thoughts around common sense, and then I sighed.

Suddenly I knew this day was going to drag on just a little longer.

“Harry,” I said to the newcomer. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

I was gazing at myself, complete with scruffy hair and wire-framed glasses. The infamous scar glared out at me from between the untamed, majestic locks of my fringe. A reflection right down to the creases in the tarnished Armani suit. Stacked next to this mirror-image were a few bags and one single trunk. Harry twirled an identical access card to the one I held between his fingers.

“The pleasure’s all mine, Harry,” he said. “You’re behind schedule – time to make up a few more hours.”

I nodded. He was making sense. “You smell pretty,” I replied. “What is that?”

Harry – myself – smirked. “The new cologne from Calvin Klein. CK BE, a unisex fragrance marked by its refreshing, oriental, and woody scent. Only sixty dollars a bottle.”

I snorted. “You’re a pansy.”

“Get going – I’ve got to get ready for dinner with Fleur.”

“Back off, pretty boy, she’s mine.”

Harry laughed. “Ha, you couldn’t handle her, kid.” He tapped his chest. “Five hours should be more than enough.”

I unbuttoned my collar so I could reach the Time-Turner on its chain. The dreaded little hourglass sparkled in the last few rays of the

bulging orange sun filtering in from the west. “Keep it up with Fleur and I’ll push you out of that window, sunshine.”

“Stop playing with yourself and get going, you dirty bastard,” Harry said, waving me away. He raised a hand to his forehead, gently rubbing our scar. “Oh and mind your head when landing – this jump is going to hurt like all hell.”

I picked up my briefcase from beside the bed, noting that Harry carried an identical one just next to him. “Any trouble I should know of?”

Harry shrugged, his grin enigmatic. I was a cruel bastard, sometimes. “Oh yeah, there’s this dude who calls himself Voldemort—”

“Fuck you.”

“No one else will...”

I spun the hourglass back with a flick of my finger and braced myself for the pain as the room dissolved in a plethora of spinning colours and a howling, vicious wind. I once more forced time back, back five hours. There was work to be done – supplies to be purchased – and plans to be set into motion.

So the world dissolved and my constant, unwavering headache tore its way out of my skull and ripped my mind asunder. I clenched my jaw and a low, helpless groan whistled between my teeth as the pain set in. Warm blood trickled from my nostrils, from my tear ducts – hot and coppery across my lips.

The world thumped back into place with an archaic snap that sent me to my knees, and toppling forward. I hit my head on the bedside table, right across my lightning-bolt scar, and cursed the intricacies of time-travel as I rode a wave of pain through spasms and general twitching on the floor of my now-empty hotel room.

Some time passed – possibly forever, possibly two minutes – and I sat up, forcing back a few dry retches and a dizzy spell. I felt my

forehead to see if it was bleeding where I'd struck the small bedside table and cursed the poorly-worded warning I'd given myself.

"Handsome bastard," I muttered, pulling myself up onto the bed.

I used the bathroom sink to clean myself up, wash away the blood from my face. Time-travel was becoming impossible, of that I was growing sure. The mere possibility presented unforeseen problems and may just serve to undo me on my latest attempt to save the world. I'd have to keep going as long as I could, keep the time-turner's use to a minimum, and pray to bumbling old Merlin that I could break through to Atlantis in this condition.

Not that prayer had ever done much good. If there was a God then He wasn't listening – or mayhap batting for the other team – and I was the only being capable of salvation here.

The world is not ready for the nightmares I've seen.

So my eyes are on you, baby, to keep me honest.

And I can't promise anything, certainly not the future. Yet all I know is that nothing endures... save change.

I Apparated out of the hotel room and down onto the street only moments before Fleur and my other self checked into the hotel. Time would not allow me to meet my younger self if it hadn't already happened, and it hadn't when I was checking-in to the hotel, and although that particular boundary can be pushed, the chaos that would ensue had to be accounted for.

Best to just avoid it.

Stepping off the apparation pad in Times Square, the sights and sounds of the city swirling around me and the heavy smell of traffic and greasy food weighty in the air, I felt a rush of raw anticipation.

This city was alive.

I felt it sure and true, as if it were my own heart beating beneath my feet along the sidewalk.

I'd been to Rome in the last few days, and I'd been to London – both huge cities swirling with life and soul. Yet they were old cities – millennia old – and New York was, on the scale of human history, brand new. There was an atmosphere of youth, of time willing to be spent and spent well, and not a trace of the ancient winding down that had crept into the archaic joints of cities such as London and Rome.

I felt young again – I was young again – and the world was there to be saved. Begging to be saved.

Onward I fared.

I ran through what I knew of the city – its Wizarding and Muggle worlds, the contacts I could start to contact, places where I could get the gold I would need – and decided that the next few hours were going to be painfully busy. First things first, however, and I stopped at the first red and white umbrella I found, the sound of meat sizzling in my ears like the singing of the angels themselves.

“Two dogs, buddy,” I told the vendor. “Grease, onions, and drenched in mustard, if you please.”

There are three great pleasures in life. Good food, good sex, and good sleep – in that order, and never in moderation.

It was a warm afternoon, and the massive steel constructs rose above me on all sides, holding true to their namesakes and seeming to scrape the very sky. I danced and ducked through the crowds on Fifth Avenue, soaking in the light and life around me in a vacuum of good intentions.

There was war all around me. Enemies on all sides, and an impending sense that I was out of my depth and way, way out of my time. Well... yeah. I was – I was lives and years out of my time. What I'd done to be here, to return to the past, would haunt me beyond the grave, of that I was sure. I wonder what the ghosts of my true past

would think of me now? Sirius? My parents, James and Lily Potter? Their little boy – to all three of them – little Harry Potter, a demon in his own right.

Oh well.

We do what we can to survive, we pay the devil his due, and we all fall screaming blind defiance into the abyss. Such is life, may it not break ya too soon.

Damn it all.

I had enough Muggle cash – more than enough American currency – to get the easy part of the day out of the way first. And what a long day it had been so far. Before I was through, this day would end up at least forty hours long. That is, if there weren't anymore jumps back with the Time-Turner. As it stood, there were three of me occupying the same time. There was the me at Fleur's, helping to cook dinner, there was the me with Fleur now back at the hotel, having just checked in, and there was the current me.

All this temporal confusion wasn't doing a damn thing to ease my headache.

There were some high-end clothes shops just off Fifth Avenue. The kind of places where it was unthinkable to step through the doorway in anything less than a suit of the same (if not greater) calibre than those available for purchase within the shop. I spent the better part of an hour and a half picking up a few new suits, cut to my size, three or four pairs of leather shoes, and some socks and boxers. A total of some five thousand five hundred dollars by the time I was through.

What can I say? If I'm gonna be saving the world and battling dark wizards and demons, then I'm going to look fucking good doing it. Plus being all suave and meaning it gave me a certain air of confidence – and the women loved that.

There was an attractive redhead wearing the world's shortest skirt and steepest high heels by the men's department, and for a moment she reminded me strongly of the lady-in-red a long day ago that had

turned out to be Saturnia. I listened for the tell-tale sign of Hey Jude, the goddesses gentle mocking, and decided I was being overly paranoid.

“The new cologne from Calvin Klein, sir,” the redhead said, her plump lips promising dark and terribly delightful things. “CK BE, a unisex fragrance marked by its refreshing, oriental, and woody scent.”

She was a sales girl (sales woman) and I bought a bottle of the fragrance for my dinner with Fleur, who eclipsed this beauty before me in everyway that mattered.

That was all I needed from this store.

I paid for a courier service to have the packages of clothes and such wrapped up and delivered to my hotel for six o'clock that evening.

I spent a half hour in a few lesser-end clothes shops purchasing pants, jeans, and simple shirts both collared and not, to replace those that Tweedledum and Tweedledee had blasted off the Falls of Tivoli two nights ago. Some slummin' around clothes that I'd need for the literal shit I'd be crawling through in the days to come.

I used the same courier service to have these bags delivered to the hotel for six, saving me the encumbrance and leaving me toting only my special briefcase.

There – that was the easy part of the day done and dusted. Now came the awkward, important bit.

I stepped back out onto the street and into the sunlight, and turned my eyes downtown and skyward, up toward the great monolith of glass and stone that hid one of the most dangerous and influential wizards in the world in plain sight.

Now was the time for the real reason I'd come to New York, of all the places in the whole wide world.

I was after one of the fragile Keys to the Past.

I've tasted ash upon my tongue.

I've stood in killing fields soaked red with shame.

I've battled Nightmare itself before the Gates of Oblivion, lost in the sway of the smoke and the cold mud.

Yet the Wastelands of Time hold no sway over me. No, none whatsoever. The dead are forever young, after all.

And there's peace to be found in the twilight.

Rockefeller Centre, stretching just off Sixth Avenue, is a complex of buildings designed and built during the Great Depression and beyond. There were shops and eateries, as well as apartments, radio towers and everything in between. The whole area was like a mini city within the city.

I headed straight for what was known to the Muggles as the GE Building, through the city-sponsored gardens and past a huge iron-bronze statue of the titan Prometheus. Spanning some seventy-floors and eight hundred and fifty feet, the GE Building supported generous masonry of elaborate design and figural sculpture.

As one of the most famous and recognised skyscrapers in New York, it made perfect sense for the boss of the biggest organised magical crime-ring in the Northern Hemisphere to call the top several floors his office – of course it was completely invisible and undetectable to most, but the signs were there if you knew what you were looking for.

And I did.

On the Muggle side of the things, the GE Building was home to a television network, and there was a bit of security, yet no one challenged me in the foyer of the complex and I reached a row of shiny elevators without raising any alarms. I hit the 'up' arrow and didn't have to wait as the doors sprung open instantly – as if I were expected.

Now the last time I'd been in an elevator, I'd been bleeding and naked and it had been plummeting to the ground floor in a ball of fire. Was that really only a night ago? Yeah, it was. Saturnia had been in it with me, disguised as the lady-in-red, and Hey Jude had been playing through the speaker system.

I listened carefully for any static-strewn Beatles tracks before stepping into the elevator and pushing the button for the seventieth floor.

I stood patiently as the lift rose, my hands folded behind me holding my briefcase as the electronic numbers counted the floors up.

"It's a long way to the top... if you wanna rock'n'roll..." I mumbled, snatching a verse of some half-remembered melody out of my disjointed mind.

The shiny metal doors parted silently, almost regretfully, and a wave of cool conditioned air washed over me as I stepped onto the fine, dark blue carpet of the seventieth floor. High, high up above the world. The space looked very Muggle. A lot of glass, big windows running parallel to the New York skyline, partitions of frosted white glass, and a coffee table holding a crystal vase of blood-red roses.

In golden cursive letters across the frosted glass in front of me were the words:

Tempus Edax Rerum

Reading those words, I knew now without a doubt that what my mind was telling me to do, that the man I was here to see, knew about the Old World. He knew of Atlantis, of the Fae Magicks.

"Tempus edax rerum..." I muttered the Latin, stepping through the glass partition and entering the so-called waiting room. "Time is the devourer of all things..."

I approached a long, large mahogany counter that created a barrier between the waiting room and elevators, and a single oak door set in

what appeared to be a reinforced steel frame. There was a single woman, stunningly beautiful and wearing a sleek silver headset seated behind the long counter, eyeing me with neither warmth nor distrust.

There were perfunctory plush chairs placed around the coffee table with its vase of roses, yet I suspected they had rarely if ever been used – just part of the façade.

“May I help you?” the woman asked. Her dark hair was tied back, exposing her severe brow. Her skin was light, pale brown, and although everything else was very Muggle, she rested her hand on a long, slender white-wood wand. A witch then – my memories confirmed it. She was a trained protector – of secrets, of her employer’s life – and thought me a Muggle at the moment.

“Ethan Rafe to see Mr. Miguel Blue,” I said, adjusting my glasses to draw attention away from the hand that was ready to snatch my wand from my inner jacket pocket in less than a heartbeat.

The woman didn’t flinch. “Mr... Blue?”

I don’t know why the most feared and respected crime lord this side of the equator, who conceivably wielded more influential power than the next two Ministries combined, called himself Blue. I suppose it was actually frightening in a simple, non-syllabic way.

“Miguel Blue.” I nodded.

“I’m sorry, young man, but there is no Mr. Blue here.”

“Are you sure now? He’s a big guy, heavysset, with greyish-white hair and goofy looking ears. Um... his voice is grainy from cigar smoke, porn star moustache, and he controls all of the legitimate criminal activity from here to Nepal.”

“Stupefy!”

Shit – this faux-secretary was fast.

I was faster.

I clicked my fingers and my wand sprang from my pocket and into my rising hand. Wordlessly, a shimmering pale blue shield, about half a metre across, sprang into existence and a wave of energy rippled outwards from where the red jet of stunning magic hit it.

In the same fluid movement that had drawn my wand and raised my effective shield, I took a large step to the left, all pretence of a young innocent child gone, and returned fire.

“Reducto!”

My simple spell wasn’t aimed at blasting the woman out of her expensive shoes, but at the mahogany counter she was positioned behind. The considerable force of my blasting curse tore the mahogany counter from its fittings and sent it hurtling backwards into the woman. She fell back with a grunt as the heavy wood slammed into her, and I used the brief few seconds of respite before she gathered herself to disarm her-

“Expelliarmus!”

-and stun her.

“Stupefy!”

That was ridiculously easy.

I was good – no question there – and I suppose my age still worked to my advantage at this stage in my life. The woman had been expecting to stun a kid. I was no kid. I didn’t want to leave her slumped over the splintered counter-desk, so I levitated her over and down into one of the comfy plush armchairs. Then set my sights on the single door in the steel frame.

A cursory glance showed it to be nothing more than a solid door, yet with my hand hovering over the brass grip I felt a fizzy vibration in the

air, the suppression of barely concealed power. It was warded then – most likely with a mind to torturous intentions.

“To dispel a ward...” I whispered, tapping my wand against the side of my leg. “Or wards.”

There were only scant memories in my mind of being in this situation before. Miguel Blue wasn't always a man I dealt with – simply because there was gold to be had elsewhere, mainly in my Gringotts vault. Yet the goblins were after my head by now, no doubt there, and what gold remained in my vault would have already ‘disappeared’. Blue was a cautious fellow, and ruthless to those that crossed him. He also coveted all lore and artefacts he could scrounge from the age of Atlantis, a historian and collector, and that made him dangerous beyond measure.

I had to respect any ward system or magical restraint that may be in place here, as it could be linked to Old World magic – whatever drips and drabs the crime lord had been able to decipher over his life could be in play against me.

I placed the tip of my wand against the heavy wood of the door, hesitated for just a moment, and then drew three quick lines in pure white light, cutting across each other and swirling back and forth. A fourth line cut through the centre of the others, and the rune I'd sketched took life – old magic tamed – melting into the wood with the crackling, sizzling sound of charring meat.

The door swung open inwards on silent hinges, and a rush of dispelled power slammed into me, forcing me back a step. It was pitch black beyond the doorway, unnaturally so. The light from the normal-looking waiting room ended in a razor-sharp line directly on the precipice of the doorway.

Not in the mood for drama and suspense, I stepped into the darkness and it swallowed me whole.

A moment of wary disorientation swamped my senses and down was up, left was right. I could have been falling or rising, and it wouldn't have made a difference because the darkness was endless—

Red runes began to flicker to life on the walls, pulsating with energy. The ancient runes throbbed like heart's blood and gave me a point of reference in the darkness. I was in a corridor, a narrow corridor, much akin to the pathway in the Magnus Fontis that had been lit with pure white and blue runes of a closer age than the ones here, daring me to proceed.

I proceeded.

"Mr. Blue," I called ahead of me, following the corridor as best I could. "My name is Ethan Rafe, and I have a proposition for you."

My voice echoed down the corridor, disappearing into forever. It was a trick of the mind, or maybe a trick of the runes, and it made the dark hallway seem endless.

I would've lit my wand and flooded my path with light, yet I recognised some of the runes on the wall, flashing intermittently dark and bright red. They were activated by wand magic, by fresh magic, and from the look of some of the crude designs the runes were set to explode.

Caught in an exploding corridor some seventy floors above the streets of New York - it was one bloody thing after another.

"The runes around me translate into the families Ad'sop and rec'lx, used for offensive defence, primarily," I called ahead of me, confident the man I was looking for could hear me – was, in fact, luring me in for some nasty end. "How do I know what only five, maybe six wizards on the planet know? Yourself included, Mr. Blue."

No answer, onward I fared.

The dank corridor was definitely longer than the length and breadth of the building it was purportedly in. Some special magic was in effect here – I doubted that I was still physically in the GE Building. Impressive magic, coupled with the Old World wards, made perhaps one of the most secure gateways Miguel Blue could have constructed.

I suppose if I'd been officially invited in, then I would have bypassed this corridor of traps and runes.

As it was, I got the feeling I was going around in circles, being tempted to use magic and blast myself straight to hell. Enough of this charade.

“Very well, let me be honest with you, as you'll find me out sooner or later,” I said, coming to a complete stop. “My name is Harry James Potter, you may have heard of me. If you haven't, then you will very soon – I'm to be framed for the murder of French President for Magic Thomas Laurent, before the day is out. I'm also the man who's going to raise Atlantis from the murky depths of time.”

I paused, straining my ears.

“Not many people know this about you, but you're an avid collector of all things Atlantis. Where other people saw myth, you found fact.” This was wasting precious time. I was becoming edgy. “You have in your possession a certain cube, found on the sea floor of the Adriatic twenty years ago. To this day, the purpose of that cube eludes you. And not only have you funded a dozen secret expeditions to dredge the Adriatic for the lost city of Atlantis, you have become convinced that there is more hiding the city than time and seawater.”

I began to laugh, loud and clear.

“You are right, Mr. Blue.”

On my right, a thin beam of white light drew a perfectly straight line up from the base of the wall, cut across and then back down – an outline of a doorway. With a click the door swung open and I stepped through back onto normal blue carpet, into a normal, quite simple office that looked out east upon the New York skyline and beyond.

The office was quaint, ordered. There were three men in the room – one seated in a high-backed leather chair, his girth belittling the massive desk in front of him, and a single meaty finger twirling the loose strands of his long moustache.

Miguel Blue himself.

Behind Blue were two other large men – only where Blue was chunky these men were corded with hard muscle, both gripping their wands tightly and staring at me without blinking. All three pairs of eyes upon me were unreadable, save for a certain amount of curiosity.

“Harry Potter,” Miguel Blue said, his rasping tone a dull chuckle above his white pin-striped suit. “Should you not be at home, protecting us all against the dark wizards that plague Europe?”

I had killed Miguel Blue in more than one life – for his crimes, for his betrayal at the end – yet it was easy to appear as if I were meeting this man for the first time. I stepped forward towards his desk. “You know me?” I asked.

“Just the legend, I’m afraid,” Blue said, shaking his flabby neck. “Just the scar and the rumours. Tell me, you slew a basilisk?”

I nodded. “Some three years ago.”

“Fascinating.”

A heavy silence descended upon the office, and I gazed around at the paintings on the wall – all of them artists’ visions of Atlantis, towering spires and golden roads, and at the pedestals displaying various pieces of what appeared to be broken pottery, twisted metal, and weird dull silver apparatus’. Remnants of a once proud world.

Blue prompted further conversation. “And you duelled a man who rose from the dead not so long ago, in the atrium of the British Ministry itself?”

Voldemort, I thought. My piss poor performance after Sirius’ death couldn’t really be called duelling. Still... “With the aid of Albus Dumbledore, yes I did.”

“Ah, Dumbledore, yes... yes. A great wizard.” Blue’s eyes had zeroed in on my briefcase, no doubt wondering what secrets lay inside. A noble wizard.”

“Although I would not call Voldemort a man – not anymore. A wraith, perhaps, or a demon – and also the first creature to see the city of Atlantis in many thousands of years.”

“Is that so?”

“It is, unfortunately.”

Miguel Blue paused, twisting his dastardly moustache. “How very... truthful your eyes are, Mr. Potter, yet hiding great secrets I think. I do not need to be a legimens to see that.”

If any one tried to invade my mind as it stood now, a jumble of fiery other lives, it would burn away their sanity. I’d seen it happen before – to Dumbledore, even, my memories told me.

“I hope you did nothing to permanently harm Miss Jereau at the front desk,” Blue said. “Such a slight would be unacceptable – I’m afraid you would have to die.”

Blunt, I remembered. He was always very, very blunt and honest. I wasn’t afraid, this man was a pissant in the scheme of things, but he was a pissant with something I needed – and I couldn’t risk incurring his wrath before I had the Key to the Past.

“She is merely stunned, and lightly at that. Mr. Blue, I’m sure you have many questions—”

“Just one.” He raised his hand, and the two bodyguards pointed their wands directly between my eyes. “And understand that your life depends upon the answer.”

I could tear apart this office and these men. I could smash the windows and send his fat, flabby arse hurtling to the street so far

below. I reined in such thoughts and took a deep breath. "Understood..."

"Good." The lord of crime's face broke out in a grin full of sunshine. "Here is the question: There is a road outside my door, it is the same road outside of your door. Tell me, Mr. Potter, where does our road lead?"

I offered a grin of my own. "Not to Rome, I take it?"

"No, not to Rome, young man."

I nodded. "Our road leads to terra incognita – to the unknown lands of the past."

Miguel Blue seemed to weigh me in a new light and for a moment I caught true surprise on his sweaty brow. He had not expected that answer, not at all. Oh good. From within his desk he removed a small chest, which he unlocked with a key from a chain around his neck, and showed me the treasure I sought.

"I do not know how you knew of what came into my possession from the Adriatic Sea, yet written upon this cube, in a dialect of Latin as old as Latium itself, are the words terra incognita. There are mysteries upon mysteries surrounding you, Potter. Why are you here?"

I eyed that cube – it had fallen into the Adriatic some five hundred years ago on a 15th century Spanish galleon. From what I had gathered across the years, from what my memories told me, the cube had been discovered in a cave of smoke and sparkling starlight, guarded by a creature of 'bone and flame'. I had spent more than one lifetime trying to track it down. I had died more than once trying to procure it.

"I thought you only had one question."

Miguel Blue smirked. "One question for your life – beyond that, this is my house, you have followed my road, and I will not be denied by a boy. Why are you here?"

I shrugged. "I've come for that cube, and two thousand galleons."

Blue seemed to seriously consider my request, affording it the same amount of thought he would any proposition before him. It wasn't for nothing that he controlled entire smuggling networks, import and export rings, Dark artefact trading and commanded enough gold and influence to run a small country.

"And you offer what in return – say, for the galleons alone?"

"I offer nothing less than Atlantis. For the galleons and the cube."

"Forgive me, but I would be a fool to take you at your word." Blue sighed. "So far, I do not see you leaving my offices in good health, Harry Potter."

I hadn't exactly arrived in good health. My stitches were killing me, as was my ridiculous headache, but I understood what he was getting at.

"Fuck you," I said, tired of the formalities being observed. "The majority of your life has been spent in search of nothing more than a myth to the world – you would be a fool to ignore me."

"Be careful," Blue said. "Be very careful. And give me a reason to believe you."

I stepped up to his desk. "May I?" I asked, my hand outstretched towards the cube.

The crime lord hesitated just for a moment before dropping the surprisingly heavy block of scripted metal into my palm. It was warm, and had been for millennia, and the intricate patterns and curvy lettering that covered the cube drew the eye deep into its depths.

"I've come into possession of certain information – information that leads me to believe the Dark Lord Voldemort has attained Atlantis, through very dark means, and that through a... unique connection I share with that particular monster, I can follow him there and ensure

that the power and wealth of an entire world do not fall into his hands and make my war effort in the United Kingdom impossible." I stopped to take a breath.

Miguel Blue continued to stroke his moustache. "Are things really so bad on the other side of the Atlantic that children must fight a magical war?"

"Things are bad enough that save for an old man and a few others, children are the only ones fighting against Voldemort in our magical war."

My fingers were busy as we spoke, feeling along the edges of the cube, and in my mind I saw runes of the Old World, of the Fae and the Twilight Folk. Runes that this small man before me could never have found any trace of in the world as it existed today. I used non-verbal magic, cast through my thoughts, to activate the cube.

Blue's beady eyes followed my hands and widened as the cube began to glow with a pale yellow light. I paused and held it flat on my hand as the sides fell away on invisible hinges, and a melody filled the tiny office – a tune that had not been heard for over four millennia.

It filled the air and it was light enshrined in song, a beating rhythm testament to a world long forgotten and never to be again. I saw Blue and his goons were mesmerised by it, so I broke the spell with a twitch of my hand and snapped the music cube closed.

"How... how did you do that?" Blue asked, his voice groggy as if he had just woken up.

"The answers will cost you two thousand galleons – a loan, guaranteed to be returned to you a hundred fold." I put on my serious face. "Honestly, Miguel, what do you have to lose?"

I had him, I always did. He would need assurances, and undoubtedly I would be tracked, but when push came to shove so long as I got out

of here with the cube and the gold then anything that followed could be discussed at the point of a wand.

And would be – it always was.

“You knew enough to find me – you knew more about me than I you, and that is a rare thing in my trade, Mr. Potter.” Blue sighed. “You know what I’ll do to you, to those you care for, should you cross me.”

It took the best part of an hour to convince this fat little man to trust me enough to loan me the cube and a small trunk with two thousand gold pieces. The gold was simply pocket change to Blue, yet the cube was of vast importance. I did my best to explain my expedition to Atlantis without giving anything of real substance away. The thing that swayed him in the end was the realisation that I was a public figure, and that I couldn’t hide.

He knew I had enemies, and that those enemies were dark wizards – and that I was to be framed for murder before the day was done. These were all assurances that, to the crime lord, assured his trust was not misplaced. If word got out that the boy wanted for high-profile murder was dealing with Miguel Blue, then any hope of proving my innocence in a reasonable manner disappeared.

We bid each other farewell, and he gave me the name of a man to contact by owl within three days, to detail my progress. I took it but had no intention of doing any such thing.

I was escorted out of the office and directly back to the elevators by Miguel himself. Miss Jereau was back in place behind her battered counter, and her eyes narrowed as she beheld me leaving apparently in one piece.

“Remember, Harry Potter,” Blue said, as the elevator doors slid open. “You have a lot to lose – men as young as yourself always do. Take care, for there is no room to err in the world you have just inserted yourself into.”

“Three days you’ll hear from me,” I lied, the small trunk of gold slung under my arm, the cube in my pocket, and my briefcase in my other hand. “Goodbye.”

The doors slid closed and I descended back into the Muggle world. Outside, the sun was setting; it had gone quarter past six. Time to get back and tell myself he had to go back in time and through all of this. Fun, fun, fun.

I found a quiet place to apparate back to Times Square and made sure to pick up the packages of clothes and such I had had delivered by courier from the front concierge desk.

There is the real world and there is the fantasy world.

There is sanity and there is madness.

There is life and there is death.

And time is the devourer of all these things...

“Stop playing with yourself and get going, you dirty bastard,” I said, waving my other self away. I raised a hand to my forehead, gently rubbing the scar. “Oh and mind your head when landing – this jump is going to hurt like all hell.”

Harry picked up my briefcase from beside the bed. “Any trouble I should know of?”

I shrugged, my grin enigmatic. I was a cruel bastard, sometimes. “Oh yeah, there’s this dude who calls himself Voldemort—”

“Fuck you.”

“No one else will...”

I watched my other self disappear and set about getting ready for dinner with Fleur. It had been a long, long day, but it was almost over.

I unpacked one of my new suits, a shiny pair of shoes, and then jumped in the shower.

Afterwards, I placed the Atlantean cube deep within my jacket pocket, alongside my wand, and picked up my briefcase. The clock on my wrist and the clock in my head said it was time for dinner.

I knocked on Fleur's door at seven o'clock on the dot, straightening my collar and making sure my jacket was buttoned as I waited for her to answer.

Had I been waiting all day for this? Yes, and more so for every extra hour I'd crammed into this day.

The room door swung open and I felt all the air in the world denied to me, as first Fleur's wonderful scent of white roses and fresh rainfall rushed over me and sent my skin into hot tingles.

Fleur herself looked stunning.

Simply stunning.

A black dress hugged her figure and left only the best of her form to the imagination. The dress cut off about halfway down her thigh, exposing legs wrapped in sheer black nylon stockings that seemed to go on forever. I wanted them to go on forever, yet the strapless high heels she wore on her feet ended all I could see that way. I drew my eyes back up, vaguely forgetting how long I was spending on this, and to her ample cleavage bordered by her platinum-blond hair, the creamy pale skin holding a dull sheen and the promise of curves unknown.

I was drawn and unable to look away. The whole world could end, Voldemort could unleash hell at that moment, and it wouldn't make a damned bit of difference to where my head and my heart was at that moment.

"You are staring, 'Arry," Fleur said, drawing my eyes back to her face, and to her subtle smile. "My, my, you are blushing red."

I cleared my throat. "You look... unattainable."

Fleur laughed. "Shall we?"

I remembered myself enough to offer her my arm, and surprise-surprise she took it. We walked side by side in silence down the corridor to the elevators, and I did my best not to stumble.

In the last twenty hours I'd faced down gods and wrestled demons, duelled hot witches and argued with crime lords, and yet here, with Fleur, I felt the age I looked. Fifteen-nearly-sixteen, no experience with women whatsoever, and drowning in my own nerves.

I let out a slow breath, exerting some control over my rampant hormones and raw desire.

"Where did you get zat suit, and ze new shoes, 'Arry? Have you been out into the city?"

I nodded. "Just to a clothes shop for a few changes of everything – wanted to look my best for dinner, although I doubt anyone will be looking at me."

Fleur smiled. "You are kind, yet sweet words will not get you out of explaining yourself."

We headed down in the elevator in relatively high spirits. Fleur and I talked quietly about nothing for now, the conversation a little strained. All eyes were drawn to her on the restaurant floor, and as guests of the hotel we were seated straightaway.

The tablecloth was elegant, the candlelight soft and the cutlery fine silver. There were a few dozen other diners, all with eyes resting for a long time on Fleur. I liked the setting, I was hungry, yet this dinner wasn't about food. It was about earning the trust that the French witch across from me had already shown.

"Time is up, 'Arry," Fleur said, her full lips sipping from a flute of clear mineral water.

Time. I searched for the right words – the truth? No, not the dreadful truth. Perhaps a less dreadful truth, a lie that could be believed.

“There’s a lot to be said,” I said. “And a lot to be believed.” I paused, sipping at my own water. So what to say? A lesser truth would have to do. “To begin with, you have to understand that through my scar my mind is linked to Voldemort’s...”

There, that was as good a beginning as any.

And there was fear in Fleur’s eyes, which would serve to distract her from the things I wasn’t saying.

Damn it all.

I was a terrible person... just paying the devil his due.

Oh well - onward I fared.

A/N: Well, there we go. You may recognise a few subtle references to Terence Jay and his song, One Blood, particularly in the second interlude. That was intentional. Thanks for reading, please review, and a new chapter should be up soon. Come mid-November I’m done with uni for the year and should be able to make a big dent in this story, perhaps even finish it with all the time that should free-up.

Chapter 14 – Pissing in the Wind

Part Five – The Wizard

Now every gambler knows, that the secret to survivin'
Is knowin' what to throw away and knowin' what to keep.

‘Cause every hands a winner, and every hands a loser,
And the best you can hope for is to die in your sleep.

~~Kenny Rogers

Dinner with Fleur had always and forever been a test of my willpower, especially when she wore those low-cut black dresses that gave just an inch too much of pale, creamy skin.

The air in the restaurant was cool and yet overlayed with the scent of oriental spices and the heavy aroma of cooking salts.

“To begin with, you have to understand that through my scar my mind is linked to Voldemort’s...”

And was that a fair beginning? Or a rather terrifying distraction from the disgusting truth? Either way, there was fear in Fleur’s perfect eyes. Good... good.

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I was in the wrong place at the wrong time – naturally, I became a hero.

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“We should order some food before I continue,” I said, tapping my fingers rapidly against the white linen tablecloth. “And some alcohol. At the very least, half this story demands whiskey and beer.”

“Very well,” Fleur replied, after a long moment in which she appraised me with those slightly fearful eyes. “But no delaying any longer beyond zat, ‘Arry.”

I summoned the waiter and Fleur and I placed our orders for dinner. My time zones were a little skewed and as such, this was the second dinner I'd had today. The first being the salmon Fleur and I prepared that afternoon, some eighteen hours ago for me. Goddamn time-travel.

As we waited for the drinks to arrive (I'd ordered a double-shot of bourbon, and thankfully didn't have to flash any ID, fake or otherwise, as the waiter's attention had been absorbed by Fleur's beauty), I contemplated once more on just what I was going to say here. How much I could get away with not saying.

Keeping Fleur with me was of the utmost importance – simply because I knew I could rely on her in a tight situation. She was quick with a wand, and ruthless to her enemies. Both good qualities. Keeping her close also ensured her safety, for the most part, with my considerable talent to protect her.

Third good reason to keep her close was that, given time, I had more than once gotten her out of those revealing black dresses and stockings and into my bed. Life holds few perks for me – a lot of the time I feel like I'm pissing into the wind. Most of the time, in fact. Fleur has always remained one of those few, precious perks.

She was strawberries and rainfall, and burning memories of a forgotten future.

I shook my head, avoiding Fleur's eyes as I waited for my drink. I definitely didn't feel like the good guy at the moment. And I wasn't, not by a long shot. Being the good guy left me with far too much accountability for my actions. I needed to be merciless, dangerous, with no sense of guilt.

Was any of this crap something I could tell Fleur, to keep her with me?

“You are always frowning, ‘Arry.”

I dragged myself out of my thoughts, glanced around for my drink, and shrugged. "What was it that made you trust me this far, Fleur?" I asked.

"It was not simply a matter of trust."

"No? I suppose it wasn't..." I found a smile. It was the Bone-Man all come to life, it was the madman who held a knife to your throat, and the madman who stopped him from slicing you open. "Far too many madmen..."

"Pardon?"

"Sorry, just frowning out loud."

Fleur tilted her head. Each individual strand of her platinum hair seemed to sparkle with promise. "Your scar... is a link to You Know Who?"

"Voldemort." I said, emphasis on the -mort. "And yes, this damn curse – the dark magic running through it – lets me see into Voldemort's head... and he into mine. We are, and always have been, two shredded souls sharing what amounts to the same mind."

Fleur was painfully silent. In that silence my bourbon arrived and I tossed it back in one, ordering another before the waiter could get away. The liquid certainly didn't have the kick of Firewhiskey, or Dragon's Breath, but it felt oh-so-good regardless.

Taking a sip of red wine, Fleur found her voice... "If I did not know you as well as I 'ave come to, 'Arry, I would say that such a link between two minds is impossible."

"So would most," I agreed, testing the waters and deciding how much to say. Fuck it. "It's not a good thing, not by far. Most of the time it's just painful, other times it's been used against me and good people have died." Family, for the most part. "This scar, Fleur, is magic raped and abused, twisted into something dark and rotten."

And what of your time-travel magic, Harry? A tiny voice tittered away in the back of my mind. What dark paths did you tread to tear your soul from your body and send it hurtling back eight full years? My hand was shaking on the table. I moved it down onto my lap. Thoughts best left for another time – another life, even. There had been plenty of those.

“I can keep going now, I think,” I said into Fleur’s familiar silence. I tapped my scar. “This is only the beginning though, it gets a lot darker.”

“Go on...” There was only a slight waver of hesitation in her voice.

I grinned, and went for the lie I’d been planning on. “Well, understanding this scar and my connection to Voldemort should help you understand why I know so much about the ‘mythical’ lost city of Atlantis.” I gave Fleur a moment to think on that. The gentle warmth of conversation from the other restaurant patrons around us seemed surreal, considering what it was we were discussing. Where did the real world go, I wondered.

“ You ‘ave seen Atlantis... because Voldemort ‘as seen Atlantis, oui?” Fleur nodded to herself – it was an honest conclusion to make from the little true information she had. “How terrifying.”

I’d seen Atlantis because I’d spent lifetimes crawling and dying through the arsehole of the world, seeking scraps of information, hidden clues and cryptic riddles. I’d done my homework, time and time again, for the ability to breach the defences around the Old World and challenge Voldemort for mastery of what remained of the greatest civilisation the planet has ever known.

In the beginning – the very beginning – my first life, there had been no challenge. Voldemort had taken and twisted Atlantis to his own ends and unleashed the power of the Old World upon our shiny new world. It was only a cruel twist of fate and my own not-so-small sacrifice that allowed me to come back to this point in time and piece the end of the world together.

To stop it – to change it. Someone has to stop the madness. Someone has to...

“You’re wondering how Voldemort found Atlantis to begin with, aren’t you?” My second double of whiskey was winding its way over from the bar. “To understand that, Fleur, you have to understand why he can’t be killed – in the general sense of the word.”

That fear had deepened in her brilliant eyes. She wouldn’t hold my gaze for more than a few seconds, unnerved by what I was saying. Who wouldn’t be? Well, I wouldn’t be, but then I’d had decades to get used to the whole godforsaken situation.

“Are you saying zat Voldemort iz immortal?” The words were a whisper, barely spoken and stolen on the air – already wanting to be forgotten.

I wanted to say no, but the best I could do was frown and shrug. You frown too much, ‘Arry. I know, sweetheart, I know. I also die too much, and lie too much, and kill too much. Drink too much... haven’t been smoking enough. Wizarding cigars were on the list.

“’ Arry?”

It would be far too easy to say no, and to say yes. Maybe yes and maybe no? This is why I fought my battles alone these days. Sure, I’d died and died because of that, but the cost, the sheer cost of the apocalypse, demanded nothing less. Yes, Fleur, Voldemort may as well be immortal.

“Do you know,” I began, sipping at my newly arrived second drink. “Do you know what a Horcrux is?”

The light in the room seemed to darken, at least to me and in my mind, at the mention of such dark magic.

Fleur tasted the word and found it unfamiliar. “Eet sounds... grotesque.”

“Oh yes.” Some words had such an affect. Fleur was part magical creature. She knew the force that drove us all more closely than most. “A horcrux is a way to cheat death by taking a life.” No sugar coating here. “An act of brutal, cold murder tears the soul asunder, Fleur.” I paused, swirling the tip of my finger in the amber whiskey. “Imagine that for a moment... just imagine.”

“’ Arry...”

“Imagine what it takes to have so little humanity that you’d murder someone, without reservation, be it a father... a mother... or even an infant. And with that act you rip your own soul apart. Your soul, the life inside of you, is maimed.” I chuckled mirthlessly. “You do that, and you have yourself half a horcrux.”

“Voldemort has done this?”

“He sure has, but the bastard has taken the idea of a horcrux further than even the darkest wizards in history.” I thought about relenting, but Fleur needed to know what she was facing if she stood by me. The hell of it was, I already knew she would stand by me. “People like you, Fleur, you could study sadistic killers like Voldemort your entire life and never understand what makes him think he had the right to rape the soul of a child and leave the body broken and dead.”

“Merde, ‘Arry,” Fleur whispered. Darker, bloodier waters now... the sharks were circling, the sharks never stopped swimming.

“There’s some spellwork, some blood magic, and an object of power involved, but once he had ‘done the deed’, so to speak, and murdered another, Voldemort made himself as close to immortal as anyone’s ever been.” My appetite was dwindling. Still, onward I fared. “Here’s the plot twist though, Fleur. Voldemort did this not once, but seven times. If you know anything of Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, then you know the significance of the number seven.”

Fleur was nodding, engrossed by the morbidity of the conversation. It was like a train wreck – brutal, bloody, but you could never look away.

I'd just divulged a secret known only to three people in the entire world. A school boy, an old man, and the demon himself.

That reminded me – I wonder if Dumbledore had gotten my patronus message yet? The timing was right for everything to explode. No doubt the old man knew Fleur and I had departed legally through PORTUS. The little goblin bastards would know soon enough. All eyes would be on America before this day was out. This long, long day... The only uncertainty that remained was this assassination plot I was supposedly to blame for. No doubt it would be in the papers soon enough.

“I'm telling you this because you trusted me enough to put your life in my hands in this last day,” I said. “Now my life, my curse, is in your hands – do with me what you will, Fleur.”

I think it was a surprise to us both when Fleur chuckled. “So zis iz how I see eet, ‘Arry,” she said, her accent thick and strong. “You share your thoughts with an immortal, soulless dark wizard, who gains his power by murdering innocent people in cold blood, oui?”

I thought about it that way. “Yeah, that about sums up the last ten minutes pretty well, actually.”

Fleur's laughter died away in a sour grimace that looked alien on such a beautiful face. “Shit,” she said. And then, for lack of anything else to say, she said it again, “Shit.”

I raised my glass. “Cheers to that,” and drained the remaining liquor in one bittersweet swallow. “Ah... Oh, barkeep!”

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Here's to the real world, caught somewhere between the Old and the New.

Are you ready for the maelstrom of fire?

No more lonely nights, Harry. No more souls torn to shreds. I still relive that day, the day I killed the real world. It haunts me. If such ghosts of the past aren't real, then why can I see them?

It all goes back to that day – eight years from now and eight years ago.

The day you jumped – screaming wild-laughter into the abyss, and sacrificed your own precious soul to the madness.

Someone had to end it, right?

Right?

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Dinner was a rather subdued affair after the opening topic of conversation. There was still a lot to say, yet by unspoken consent Fleur didn't want to hear anymore just yet.

What had been said was terrible enough for now – and a helluva lot to take in.

Instead Fleur told me of her years at Beauxbatons Academy – the French Hogwarts equivalent (but, you know, without the castle and dark, dark history of magical chaos and war) – and her plans to continue her study in a few months at a sort of wizarding college in Paris. She wanted to learn the finer points of wizarding law because, as she said, “There iz a more than capable brain beneath my beauty”. It was an admirable career path.

Shame about the war that was coming – that was already here in so many ways. It would put a rather unmerciful bolt to the brain stem of that particular cow.

I had ordered some sort of marvellous crumbed beef with a spicy curry sauce. It came with a pot of watery seafood soup and cream liquor. All in all, not bad grub, considering I was six shots of straight whiskey to the wind. I had to admit, my head was spinning a little, and I was feeling more and more attractive as the night wore on.

Maybe no more whiskey. Well, maybe just one more. Not as if I had to drive or fly anywhere tonight.

Ah, but what if demons attack, Harry? the voice of reason asked. Clearly, I hadn't had enough to drink if this whole situation still allowed for objective reasoning. What of Saturnia, or this new bastard Chronos, who can appear from nowhere?

All good points, I suppose. But what of numbing my frickin' headache? What of trying to forget, even for just a night, the nightmares burning through my mind? I hadn't had a moment's peace in four solid days, not really. There were no words, no way of making anyone understand the countless memories I had of Hell – of Hell unleashed upon the Earth time and time again. The vivid memories and faux sensations I had of dying, in so many wonderful ways, were the worst. It sucks to die young, of that I could be quite sure.

"You are mumbling, 'Arry."

I blinked and caught myself whispering my current internal monologue under my breath. Heh, so much for maintaining an air of sanity. I hadn't been sane for years, long before I took up this time travelling lark. "I'm just thinking..." I said.

"Oui, obviously. About what?"

"You must still have a hundred and one questions."

Fleur nodded. "I do, yet I am also beginning to understand why you are so hesitant to answer most of them. Why you so often put a false humour in your words. I may not be able to sleep easy for some time after learning ze truth of You Kn-of Voldemort." The last was uttered as a defiant whisper, travelling through a tunnel of veiled fear.

"Are you second-guessing your choice to come with me?" Of course you are.

Fleur shrugged. "Oui, yes—I suppose." In one smooth, elegant, graceful movement that had my eyes darting from her slender arms to her curvaceous neck and rose-red lips, Fleur drained her glass of red wine.

"I can get you a Portkey back to France whenever you want," I said. Fleur wasn't going anywhere – we both knew it. At the core of us both there was a thirst for the thrill and adventure of the life I had to live. This whole thing, however awful and terrible the war might be, was too damned exciting.

At least that's how I saw things.

Fleur's perspective may have been skewed by the unknown elements in the story this time around. Saturnia and Chronos, the Bone-Man and the threat on her life from what amounted to a demigod.

"You expect to run into zat man in my garden again, don't you, 'Arry?" Fleur said, almost mirroring my thoughts. "The man who held me at knife point, who spoke of such strange things..."

I nodded. "I think he's the bastard who framed me for this assassination thing we've heard so little about. Chronos – if you recall his name – has a counterpart in a woman that calls herself Saturnia. She was the one that stabbed me in Italy. I... I don't know who they are or what they really want, but I think they're trying to herd me toward Atlantis." I paused. "For their own dark ends, no doubt."

Fleur had more to think about, it seemed, so I set about ordering another drink. I decided to lay off the hard spirits and had the waiter bring me over an imported beer. Clutching the cool bottle reminded me that there was work to be done tonight, still, in the form of runes and captured starlight.

"And Atlantis itself, 'Arry Potter," Fleur said, drawing me back into conversation. "You 'ave simply decided to go after eet yourself? At the very least, Albus Dumbledore could aid you—"

“Dumbledore would have me shielded from harm as he investigates the scant possibility that Voldemort could be doing something so outrageous as to seek the Lost City.” I chuckled. “There are fairytales mixed up in this mess, Fleur, and Albus Dumbledore has his mind set on more... hallowed tales.”

The French beauty shook her head. “There is more going on in Britain and the war than I know, isn’t there?”

“Only a lot.”

“What do you know?”

“Only a bit.”

“Ah, and yet here you are, scouring the globe for heaven knows what in order to find the way to ze Lost City of Atlantis. Unbelievable.”

To that I could only shrug. “I kind of know the way.” Little lie. “I don’t know how I know for sure, but so far all signs are pointing the way ahead.” Big lie.

“You ‘ave angered powerful people, especially ze goblins.”

I waved my newly arrived beer dramatically through the air, smirking with an air of supreme confidence. “Let them come. Let them all come.” My face fell a few notches. “They’ll have a fight on their hands.”

“I am still in awe over your battle with ze Bone-Man. I felt absolutely paralysed in front of zat thing.”

I wondered if any of the Muggles nearby could hear our conversation. If so, what were they making of it, I wonder. Probably understanding about one word in three. I wish I could have been that blissfully ignorant – and so hopelessly oblivious. When would it be someone else’s turn to save the world? I was no good at it... No, not at all. And last time counts for all.

“That’s part of its glamour,” I said, picturing the legions and hordes of the Old World unleashed upon our modern world. Fucking stupid Voldemort meddling with power best left dead. “Creatures like that... well, they aren’t creatures. They have intelligence - a vast, dark intelligence. Completely alien to our own, and yet they understand the world. They understand the power of human emotion and twist it toward fear. That’s what paralysed you.”

“And you, ‘Arry? Why not you?”

“I’m fearless,” I replied. There was a grain of truth to that – but just a grain. I feared myself. I feared the damage I could do (had done – will do). “And you can block out the mind-numbing influence by shutting down your emotion, separating yourself from... from feeling. It’s not an easy trick, but try it sometime. Become detached.”

Fleur laughed. “Iz zat why you acted so insane, laughing and dancing across my garden path and chopping down my trees?”

I blinked. Had I done that? Yes, yes I had. Fuck... “Heh. No, that was just me being me.”

Fleur finished her third drink and looked over at me from across the golden rim of the wine glass, her eyes almost suggestive and her demeanour so raw it was unintentionally sexual. “Just ‘Arry?” she said, a low husk to her whisper. “Just ze famous ‘Arry Potter.”

I shivered, unable to suppress the wave of ecstatic desire that rushed through me. A faint blush warmed my cheeks and that broke the spell, for Fleur at least, who smiled and looked away towards the bar, contemplating another drink.

I let a heavy second pass... and another.

Something had just passed between us – something... without time. Why did that sound right? What did I mean? No matter. It was nonsense. Nothing was without time. Nothing. That something, though, it was the start of something more, of that I was sure.

Love reign o'er me, I thought. And bring the rain.

Strange thoughts. But then my mind had become a very strange place a few days ago – burning with an eternity of broken memory. One thing was sure, with or without Fleur, the world would never be the same by the time I was through.

Fleur had decided to order that next drink. I think perhaps she had also sensed that something between us – that brief moment of murky clarity – as the rest of our conversation for the evening turned to lighter things, and stayed there. We talked of the magical world, of the muggle world, and steered clear of any topic that drifted too close to the Dark War.

I was glad the subject of Voldemort and Atlantis had been dropped. How could I explain that, by his very soulless nature, Voldemort was more alike to magic and the Old World than any wizard or witch who prided themselves on being good and decent, and steering clear of any magic dubbed a 'Dark Art'? How could I explain that Atlantis, the wondrous lost city of the first race of magical folk, cried out to Voldemort because it was as torn and broken as he was?

How could I ask Fleur to walk into a world where it was a crime to have a soul?

~~*~*

We better stop, hey, what's that sound? Everybody look what's going down...

~~*~*

Fleur was a picture of elegance and grace and I had nearly stumbled into the vase in the corridor as she swiped her keycard and stepped into her room. I was over the limit and three shades of drunk, yet for the first time in days there was some minor abatement to my ferocious headache.

“Goodnight, ‘Arry,” Fleur said, standing in the doorway. “An... illuminating dinner, yet a pleasant evening despite ze talk of dark magic.”

I nodded happily, standing in my suit and feeling brave enough to try my luck, to invite myself in to Fleur’s room. But that would be foolish. I was many things – a time-traveller, a wizard, a killer, a heroic villain, a mess – but I wouldn’t be that guy. That guy that had leered at Fleur since she was old enough to turn heads, that saw nothing but curves and long legs, and wanted nothing more than to tear her clothes off in a fit of arrogant, selfish, misguided passion.

“Goodnight, sweetheart,” I said softly, pushing my glasses up on the bridge of my nose and turning away. “Keep your wand close, and blast a hole through to my room if anything happens,” I called back over my shoulder.

“’ Arry.”

One word spoken like a command and I stopped, turning on the spot. “Yes?”

Fleur met my eyes and smiled. It was very honest. She stepped back out into the corridor, close enough to embrace me... and she did. Her soft, cool lips met my cheek – which blazed with the fire of all my wasted lives.

Was it terrible to feel so wasted – so thin and stretched to impossible limits – and so miserable at a moment like this? More questions than answers... maybe yes, maybe no.

“Goodnight, ‘Arry,” Fleur said again, with subtle purpose.

And here is a moment without time, I thought. Her lips were close enough to catch with a proper kiss. I dared not...

“You do frown too much, ‘Arry—you’re frowning right now.” Fleur laughed, softly and a little sadly. “I’d tell you not to worry so much... but you, of all people, should be worrying. For all our sakes, I theenk.”

I could smell warm red wine on her breath. It was comforting, and made me think of a woman I had never honestly met – my mother. I don't know why I had that thought... but it left me feeling afraid. I turned and fled with another quick, muttered "goodnight", as fast as I could, feeling ashamed of my arousal.

Back in my room the night was young but the day had been long – too long. I was feeling warm from the alcohol buzz and more than a little confused about my feelings for Fleur.

Damn it all, I thought.

My younger self, the boy I had been just half a week ago, now lived and cared for two women with the stupid grace of an older man. A terrible older man that had come back from the future, with screaming memories of having been here more than once a long, long time ago. I'd been turned into a burning mess of confused truth and bitter certainty – certainty that nothing lasts, not ever.

I hadn't bothered with the lights but there was a soft glow of fluorescent colour shining up from Times Square far below. A rectangle of pale light stretched across the carpet as I opened the mini-bar and removed two bottles of sweet, sweet Belgium beer. I twisted the caps off both, took a swig from one, and poured the rest down the sink in the bathroom.

Is Fleur thinking about me? I wondered. No doubt she was, but not for the reasons I was thinking about her.

I tore the sticky labels from the beer bottles and removed my wand from the inner pocket of my suit jacket. Now I needed to concentrate through the drunken haze, as I had a flickering memory of cutting my thumb off with this spell I was about to attempt.

Okay... "Sil-othrinum!" Old magic. As old as the earth.

The tip of my wand began to glow with a bead of fiery blue light that whitened almost to silver as a wave of heat washed over me and blistered the bathroom sink. The bead of light narrowed and

lengthened into a thin needle – hot enough to scorch bone, or glass. I held the first beer bottle by its neck and began to etch and melt runes into the clear glass. Streaks of beer foam evaporated under the heat.

It was slow work and I regretted the bourbon now, as a mess of runes flooded through my aching mind. I picked the ones I needed – a slew of lesser runes for strengthening the fragile glass, clearing it of impurities, and a handful of higher runes that turned the bottle into something else entirely... a receiver.

A receiver for what, Harry?

Well, for starlight.

It took me ten minutes for each receiver and when I was done the bottles were still bottles – only they weren't. They were vessels. The glass was unnaturally clear, and when the runes cooled it was as if they had been crystallised within the thickness of the glass. Magic was a wonderful, dangerous thing. It turned simple, sharp lines into runes of power, which moved and changed shape within their new clear prison.

“Done and done,” I muttered... bone and bone... wanting to go bed.

But no bed just yet. I filled each bottle a third of the way up with water fresh from the tap and left the bathroom.

The vessels I took over to the window, placing them on the sill a hand span apart, and let them get on about their work. Kicking off my shoes, I undressed down to my boxers and ever so carefully lowered myself down onto the bed. The stab wound in my side had bled through into the bandages again. My stitching wasn't great – but it was dry, which made the blood a problem for the morning.

It was 21:42 and thirty-three seconds according to the clock in my head and the watch on my wrist. Bed time then. I'd need to be up about dawn, to get on with the next arduous day.

A somewhat long and aching sigh bled out of me as my head hit the pillow. I'd lost count of the hours of this day and all that happened...

but it was all said and done now. Done but can't be undone, as the saying goes.

Over on the windowsill, my bottles began to sing, like the chiming of a bell just below hearing. Through blurred eyes I saw a wisp of something that looked like white smoke, or mist, filtering in right through the window. It flowed into the mouth of each bottle. Within the mist were sparks of pure silver light. The sparks brightened and dimmed on the whims of passing time.

Starlight.

A magical ingredient not manufactured for the best part of 5,000 years. I suppose I should've been impressed with something so rare and amazing. But I was just tired. Starlight was incredible though – incredibly destructive. The water in the bottles was to keep the sparks of light fluid and cool, and it was already flowing with tiny silver dots of power. If one of those bottles shattered...

Heh. Well.

If one of those bottles shattered full of starlight, bursting to the brim, the wave of energy released would be mindless and merciless – a cascading hurricane of power that would level this hotel and turn Times Square into dust.

Yeah, I was making a bomb.

Why? For the same old why. For power and for fear and because someone has to stop the madness... to stop the madness... stop the—

Starlight has other uses, too, but none of them were nearly as fun.

The soft music spiralling down the necks of my bottle-bombs sent me drifting off into a muddled sleep only a few minutes after my head had hit the pillow. It was a dark sleep, restless and rotten, but sleep nonetheless...

~~*~*

What's that sound?

It's the sound of time ticking away, and my life ending one second at a time. That's a beat we all hear...

I guess sometimes I'm the only one that can make a difference. A chaotic agent for change, using and abusing time.

God damn the heroes that don't question their actions.

God pity those that do.

~~*~*

For a wonder, I actually felt better in the morning. Sure I was mildly hungover, my stitches itched so much they hurt, and my headache was beating hard and fast enough to march to war (oddly fitting), but still I felt as if sleep had actually done me some good.

It was 05:42 and twelve seconds – just before true dawn.

The sky was a tentative pale wash beyond my window, and my bottles of starlight twinkled very, very dimly. Just a wisp of a spark. Starlight was harmless during the day—well, no, no it wasn't. That amount could still explode, just not as spectacularly as if it were night. It would only blow off, say, the top seven floors of the hotel. Sobering thought, somewhat. Starlight needed nightfall, needed darkness, to truly shine. I suppose there is some sort of poetic irony in that.

Okay, it was July 17th. A new day. A Wednesday.

I'd come far in the last few days, survived more than a few unexpected scrapes, made a few more enemies, yet there were still miles to go. Days to go. Months and worlds to go.

Best be getting on with it.

A shit, shower, and shave later found me sealing my starlight bottles up tight, as fresh as a daisy and dressed in one of my cutting suits. I

needed to look the part today, to earn some trust. I fused the mouths of the bottles closed with heat from my wand, thinking about Fleur and breakfast and where best to obtain a wizarding newspaper. I needed to check and see if I was wanted for an international assassination.

I had a feeling I was.

But so what?

I stocked my briefcase with what would be needed for the day. First off, I took out some of the crap I'd gathered over the last few days – namely half a million dollars in various Muggle currencies – to free up a bit of space in the tarnished leather case. I kept the Invisibility Cloak in there, and added my two bottles of starlight, about two hundred galleons from the stash I'd cheated Miguel Blue out of, and his magical cube which would serve as one of the Keys to the Past.

After that, my case was full and heavy again, but the day would empty it of most of the remaining cash and possibly the manuscript I had gained from the cavern deep within the heart of Mt. Everest.

Special book that – one half of the most cryptic document ever conceived. And there was only one man alive with a mind sharp enough to read it. I'd be meeting that man for the first time today – in this life, at least. Jason Arnair.

And that was that – it was still early, too early to disturb Fleur – so I stood before the window and gazed down at the city beyond the glass, my hands clasped behind my back and my eyes slightly narrowed. Heh, I was frowning. I smoothed my brow and considered my options, all my options, looking for a way out.

What would happen if I threw myself out this window?

I'd wake up in the past four days ago to such pain that my eyes would burst in their sockets, to pain enough to kill me, and start the cycle over again. I could not die – I. Could. Not. Die. To do so would be a sentence straight into Hell. Gosh darn it, but death would not be the end of suffering, merely the beginning of futile indifference.

I had to win this time.

I had to play the game smart, I had to play the game to win, and I had to stop thinking of it as a game. Because it wasn't, not anymore. It had become a game, because I got a new life every time I died, but that was off the cards now. Someone had changed things – forever – and there was no going back. If I had to point the finger at anyone for that...

Saturnia and Chronos.

Two people who had assumed the names of myth and legend, of timekeepers from millennia ago. Who knows? Maybe they were gods of old. But I did not believe in gods, or even a God. There was just chaos, and darkness, and the most terrible of things bred in the deep places of the universe. Things that must be fought.

Nightmares (laughing, shambling bone-men) that must be fought.

So, if this was the last throw of the dice, what could I afford to lose? How much could I sacrifice before victory would not even matter? One city? Two? A country? A continent? Or a more personal cost – Fleur, Tonks? Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix? Ron and Hermione – Neville – the most loyal of friends? What price ended the game forever?

There was a soft knock on my room door, drawing me out of my thoughts and back into the world of the living – which was surprisingly brighter than I expected. The sun had risen, and risen high. What time was it? The clock in my head told me just before seven, but my wrist watch...

It was 08:59 and fifty-eight seconds.

I'd been standing, as still as a statue, and staring out at New York City for best part of two hours. It had felt like thirty seconds, if that. My legs felt heavy and cramped as I turned from the window to answer the door, furious thoughts of lost time and inconsistent passage making me scowl.

It was Fleur at the door, of course, dressed in tight jeans and a blouse of sheer white silk. Around her neck, hiding amongst golden-platinum sunbursts of perfect hair, was a silver pendant, two sharp fangs crossed over one another. She looked great, she looked fresh, and ready for the day ahead.

I looked as if I hadn't slept.

"Good morning, 'Arry."

I wanted to wake up next to her and hear that. More than winning the war, even, such was the drive of desire. Foolish. "Morning, Fleur. Breakfast time?"

"Oui. You will be taking me for fresh fruit and light pancake."

"I will be? Yes, I will be. Just let me get my briefcase."

Breakfast was served at a small café-restaurant at the hotel, and I had what Fleur ordered, with glasses of cool juice and a lot of healthy nonsense that served to brighten me up a little.

As we ate, I outlined the plans for the day. We would be Apparating to Connecticut – to New Haven – and onto Yale University where the second half of my cryptic novel had been housed in the rare book section of the library for decades. To the Muggles, it was known as the Voynich Manuscript, and utterly indecipherable without the corresponding half in my briefcase. I thought of it as the Devil's Diary, because it contained all manner of hell.

"You scared me last night, 'Arry."

"Dark magic's supposed to be scary."

"I spent most of the night trying to fall asleep, thinking about whether or not to continue on with you today."

I sipped my juice, already wishing again that it was bourbon. "And...?"

Fleur met my eyes, her expression unreadable, and then her lips formed a terrible, beautiful smile. "I want to see Atlantis, I want to help you win zis war, and I want to look my attackers in ze eye with 'Arry Potter at my side."

"Heh, you don't need me for that last bit."

"Non? How better to find a Death Eater, like ze one who attacked me in London, than to follow ze Chosen One around? Ze Death Eaters will come to him."

I sighed at that title, smiling a little. "You're most welcome company, Fleur." There was a moment of silence, the severity of our conversation offset a little by the television above the buffet playing an advertisement for Coca-Cola. "And I'm sorry I scared you."

The French beauty laughed, as clear as crystal – or starlight. "You seem to make an 'abit of eet. Ah, which reminds me, no more Muggle stitching, you must promise me zis!"

I chuckled. "But what if I'm really bleeding?"

Fleur's eyes flashed. "Then I will tend to you, somehow, even if magic seems not to work. You should not 'ave to stitch yourself back together."

That was oddly touching. It made me feel happy, if nothing else. I guess I was too tired or too thoughtless to show it on my face though, because Fleur looked away, perhaps a little embarrassed about being so open with me.

"Thank you," I said, and I meant it. "Thank you, Fleur Delacour." And I was more than thankful, I was in fucking love. "Shall we get on with the day?"

Outside the hotel, back in Times Square, I led Fleur over to the Apparation pad. I was mindful that it had almost been a full day since anything had attacked me, including my new friends Saturnia, Chronos, and those freakin' Bone-Men and Orc-Mare, yet under the warm morning sun, the prospect of being set upon by anything felt so remote as to be idiotic.

So I was on my guard.

"I'll side-along us," I said to Fleur, as we reached the pad. It was deserted, in the alleyway alongside the hotel, no other magical travellers. "We should pop out just outside of Yale University in Connecticut."

Fleur offered me her hand, and I took it. "Why are we headed there?"

I grinned. "Need to check a book out of the library, and meet a man who's going to help me read a map..."

"A map? To where?" Fleur answered her own question. "To Atlantis."

"Got it in one. Ready?"

Fleur nodded. "Oui."

With only the slightest of pops, Fleur and I disappeared into the tiny space between spaces, and crossed about a hundred miles north in the blink of an eye.

In a swirl of green and grey the world spun into place around us both, still hand in hand, and firm ground returned underfoot. The sun still shone overhead in a cloudless sky, only now we weren't surrounded on all sides by massive skyscrapers. We were standing on grass, soft and spongy, and dotted with grey mossy headstones.

"Here we are," I said. I wondered if Fleur would let go of my hand first. I wasn't about to give up the contact.

Fleur looked around at the new surroundings and blinked. “A cemetery?” she said, with a hint of a question.

I nodded. “Yep, a cemetery – Yale University is just across the street over there.” I pointed beyond the field of old tombstones and cast iron fencing, between copses of ancient trees, at more modern buildings and a steady flow of traffic on the road. “If memory serves, this is Grove Street Cemetery.”

“You ‘ave been here before?”

I shook my head. “Read about it,” I lied. “So I knew where to Apparate.”

The rows of mismatched tombstones looked like lines of jagged teeth, spaced unevenly between large evergreen trees. Fleur and I followed the main road through the cemetery out into the parking lot and street, heading towards the large campus buildings of Yale University.

There were dozens of people, all of them probably Muggles, moving to and fro along the street, diving in and out of shops and heading into the university. New Haven had been home to Yale for the best part of three hundred years – it was barely out of infancy on my scale of the Old World, yet there was an air of knowledge here, as subtle as rustling leaves...

Fleur and I did not fit in – not at all. Mostly because of her beauty, but primarily because this was part of a world we could never truly belong to. We stood out in an incomprehensible way that made people give us a second glance.

The architecture of the open buildings around us was fancifully gothic, interspersed with iconic modern buildings that seemed to match the towering spires of the old campus. Home to more than a dozen libraries, with over twelve million volumes, I was here today for just one book, and out of all the books here, it was the only one that didn’t belong.

We were heading towards one of the larger modern buildings, one of the libraries that was reserved exclusively for the preservation of rare

books and manuscripts. I could almost hear the Voynich Manuscript calling to me from here. Come get me, Harry, loose me on the world. It was in the Beinecke building, a six storey complex with towers of above-ground book stacks. Due to its fascination, the Voynich was kept in a display case of its own on the ground floor.

The security was minimal, there were people coming and going all day and night. Students, for the most part, thousands of them, as well as lecturers, professors, university faculty. As if we were any other pair of students, Fleur and I walked into the cool still air of the Beinecke library building, through automated doors and into the heavy, dry conditioned space.

Bright circular lights hung from the roof, and although it was a fresh day outside, with bright broad sunlight, in here the light was dim and there was a tentative peace embracing the six storeys of preserved books.

“Impressive, isn’t it?”

“Oui,” Fleur said. “Eet reminds me of Finolae Hall at Beauxbatons – only there are less books. I loved all the books in zat hall.”

I laughed. “Remind me to take you to the Magnus Fontis one day.”

“Where?”

“Ah, never mind. Follow me this way...”

I set off across the polished hardwood floors, under the soft glow of halogen lights and past shelves of old books, some encased behind glass, most loose yet carrying an air of superiority that warned visitors not to touch.

It didn’t take long to find what I’d come looking for.

The Voynich Manuscript. Sealed within a singular glass case next to an original Gutenberg Bible.

The Muggles didn't know much about the manuscript, and what they did know was heavily inaccurate. It was discovered in the ruins of Avalon by a Muggle archaeologist named Wilfrid Voynich in 1912. This half had been kept in a similar fashion to the half I'd found in Nepal, yet Avalon was lost to the wizarding world – annihilated to less than ruins by Merlin Ambrosius six hundred years ago, when the legendary wizard had attempted to retrieve the manuscript. He had failed, but he had destroyed the Bone-Man guardian – at the cost of his own life and that of the ancient outpost of Atlantis.

This manuscript before me remained buried, preserved by Old World sorcery, until uncovered near Glastonbury, in the few sparse remnants of the once-proud Avalon.

It was about two hundred and fifty vellum pages thick, resting open on a page of illegible scribbles and a faded purple sketch of some monstrous plant, with thorny green foliage and a blossom the size of a small car.

For the best part of the century it had eluded translation, and for good reason. It was missing the key, the key in my briefcase. Together, and with the right mind working on it, a path to Atlantis through the muck and mire of history could be forged.

“Zis is what we came for, oui?” Fleur asked. “Are you going to steal it?”

Her voice was a whisper yet there was no one around. I knew there were security cameras but they wouldn't see a thing. A simple switching spell would net me the Voynich, and we'd be on our way.

“This is a magical text, Fleur, made by the last man to see Atlantis before it was lost.” I shook my head. “He should have left it buried, and let the city die, but such is life... we can follow his riddles, his map.”

I removed one of the books from the free shelves around me and held it flat on my palm. Making sure the coast was clear, I tapped my wand on the text and muttered the spellwork.

Both the volume in my hand and the ancient volume behind the case shimmered and faded away to nothing for just a second, and then I was holding the Voynich Manuscript. In its place behind the glass was a poor imitation that would not fool anyone but the electronic cameras. It would have to do.

“Let’s go,” I said, shoving the stolen manuscript into my briefcase. It was millennia old, but imbued with the strength of ancient magic. “There’s a man we have to see.”

No one accosted us leaving the library and soon we were back out in the sunshine on this normal, normal day. Fleur seemed to shine in the light, she always did, as we headed deeper into the campus under the canopy of trees and along the breaks of stone architecture.

“This man, ‘Arry, he is a Muggle?”

“Yeah,” I said. “And as fate would have it, he’s the only one who can read that book we—heh, sorry—I just stole.”

“Why is zat?”

I shrugged. “It’s a magical text, but it wasn’t made for just any mind.” I thought about how best to answer. “How good is your memory?”

“Fairly good, I’d say... why?”

“Do you remember what you had for breakfast?”

Fleur smiled. “Oui, fluffy pancakes.”

I nodded. “Okay, good, now do you remember what you had for breakfast on this date ten years ago?”

Fleur blinked. “Non, of course not.”

“Of course not,” I agreed. “Well, the man we’re going to see, Jason Arnair, his memory is good enough to recall what he had for breakfast on this day ten years ago.”

Fleur processed that. “Merde, impossible!”

I laughed, wanting to hold her hand again and spend the day sitting in the sun somewhere. “I shit you not. His mind is unique, possibly in the whole world. It’s called an eidetic memory, only this fella’s brain is a lot cleverer than that.” I shook my head. “It’s hard to explain – you’ll see it when you meet him. He’s the only one who can read the manuscript because of how it’s designed. It’s constantly changing, when both halves become one, and it flickers through runes and symbols so quickly that any normal brain couldn’t keep up.”

“Oh...” Fleur was deep in thought.

“That’s why we need this Muggle.”

“Well, if you say so...”

I could recall the way to Arnair’s office, but I made a point of looking at the map board and following the little signs on the building doors to find the right faculty building. I had to be mindful not to make it look too obvious that I’d done this all before, many times, otherwise Fleur would have some awkward questions.

An archaic stone structure with vaulted windows and a spiral tower marked the entrance to the faculty building, yet inside was a lot more modern and cool. There were banks of computers, a reception area, and an elevator next to a staff office board. According to the board, Professor Jason Arnair could be found on third floor, room 32.

Fleur and I took the lift up in silence. I hummed along quietly to some nonsense tune, thinking the day through and where I had to be by tomorrow in the grand scheme of things...

Soon enough we arrived at the right office, the golden plaque confirming the owner’s name. The wooden door was open, and the

space within was a mess of filing cabinets and stacks of books, papers, and all manner of academic material piled high over two desks on either side of the room.

There was a woman seated at one of the desks, tapping away at a computer and nearly buried underneath stacks of books and manila folders. The nameplate hanging precariously on the edge of the desk identified her as Grace Connor.

“Knock, knock,” I said, drumming lightly on the open door.

The young woman – probably early twenties – looked up sharply, although her face was soft and gentle, welcoming. Calm. Even confident. She was plainly beautiful, brunette curls and blue eyes. “Yes? Can I help you?”

“We’re looking for Jason Arnair.” Now I had a vague memory of meeting this woman once Before, ever so briefly and in the same circumstance.

Grace’s eyes jumped from me to Fleur, where they widened at her undeniable beauty, at her lithe yet domineering presence, and settled there. “Professor Arnair is away for the day. Can I take a message?”

“You work with him?” I asked, pulling her eyes away from Fleur.

“I’m one of his post-grads, yes. He’ll be back tomorrow morning, if it’s urgent. You can make an appointment?”

Well, shit. This is why I needed to stay on schedule. If all had gone to plan, if I hadn’t been stabbed or thrown off a waterfall, if Bone-Men hadn’t attacked, then I would’ve reached this office yesterday – and all would be well. Damn. It wasn’t a devastating setback, but when it came down to five minutes between victory and defeat, between the future and the end of the world, then setbacks could kill.

I looked at Fleur, she shrugged her elegant shoulders, and I found a smile. “Best make that appointment then.”

“Okay.” Grace pulled a pad of post-it notes towards her, a pen from behind her ear, and raised an eyebrow. “Name?”

“Harry... Smith.”

“Harry Smith. Your student number?”

I clicked my fingers. “Ah, sorry, I’m not a student. I’ve a need for Jason Arnair’s expertise in archaeology.”

Grace nodded. “You didn’t seem old enough to be a student. Professor Arnair’s time is very limited and very valuable, you know.”

Not as valuable as mine, sweetheart. “Fifteen minutes at ten o’clock tomorrow morning would be great. He’ll want to see me.”

“May I enquire as to why?”

“Atlantis,” I said, and the word fell dead on the floor, as swift and as blunt as a hammer’s fall.

Grace’s somewhat standoffish demeanour changed. “Wow, really? Did you see his guest lecture last week on Old World Mythology?”

“I missed it – but there’s an artefact I’d like him to see.”

“Hmm...” She bit down on the end of her pen. “He will definitely be intrigued.”

“Well, alright then,” I said, a little put-off by the woman’s interest. “Bye.”

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I will show you fear in a handful of dust, the poet cried.

We need help, the poet reckoned.

~~*~*

The sun was a little higher, the wind a little warmer, and the campus at Yale University a little more busy as Fleur and I exited Jason Arnair's faculty building and began a slow amble along a path beside a trimmed hedgerow, heading back toward Grove Street Cemetery.

"Well, 'as zat thrown a spanner in your works, 'Arry?" Fleur brushed my shoulder and smiled.

"Somewhat." I nodded. "Back to New York, I guess – I sense you've thought of a few more questions since last night."

"Oui, but only a few."

"Heh. Liar."

Fleur giggled and blew me a kiss. We could be normal for a few seconds, it seemed, while the world tumbled into blind chaos around us.

Attracting all manner of attention, Fleur fell silent and her face assumed that cruel, icy expression – warning fools to stay away, to look and stare if you dare. We headed out across a carpark, metal paintwork sparkling in the sun, and the wrought-iron gates of the cemetery, under an arch of old stone, soon came back into sight. Our apparation point was near.

Leaving most of the crowds behind, we crossed over the road in front of some fancy juice bar, weaving through the slow traffic. We passed under the arch back into the cemetery, and the inscription in the dusty stone overhead read:

'The Dead Shall Be Raised.'

"What does that mean?" Fleur asked.

I shook my head. "Religion – from the Bible. Corinthians, if memory serves." I paused and searched my memories, wading through images of Muggles huddled around dark campfires at the end of the

world, muttering small prayers and clinging to dog-eared copies of the Bible. Very sad. “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed.’ I think that’s how it goes...”

Fleur looked at me sideways. “Oh... Thank you, ‘Arry.”

I said nothing and on we went. It was turning out to be a warm day. I suppose the next stop would have to be the magical community in New York. A few supplies were needed, basic stuff for now, but most of all I wanted a look at a wizarding newspaper. With the Ring of Concealment, the goblin-relic from Atlantis, on my finger no one would be able to track me in the traditional ways (Saturnia and Chronos proving the exception to the rule), but I still needed to know who was after my head.

“Shorter list of who isn’t...” I whispered, shoving a hand into my pocket and thumping my briefcase against my leg.

“Pardon?”

“Oh, nothing. Just frowning.”

The rows of uneven tombstones were casting long shadows under the warm summer sun. There were few people about, some laying fresh flowers above long dead memories, some standing quiet aside aching stone. There was a lone man in blue overalls and a large straw hat, digging a grave with a heavy shovel, just ahead. No one to really see us leave.

“We should head behind those tress.” I wondered if Hedwig was still in France. “Apparate... straight back to Times Square...”

“You are out of breath, ‘Arry. Is eet your side?”

I was panting a little. And sweat had broken out along my brow. My stitches felt fine though... Something was wrong. My instincts were twitching. I stopped walking and ever so carefully removed my wand from my pocket.

Fleur saw the look on my face. “Oh... merde.”

“Shit, indeed.”

What was different?

What had changed?

My breathing had shallowed, lengthened, as if I'd been holding it underwater. Yet not quite – this feeling was different. All day every day I was running, I was moving, but now I felt stationary, immobile... caught in some invisible net. Even the chaotic sheets of fire and ice pouring through my mind, my burning memories of death upon death, had ceased to fall.

I sucked in a harsh breath – that was what had changed. My memories were silent, dead. Which meant that—

There was someone – something – in my head.

Fuck.

I threw up a pitiful mental wall, a barrier constructed of what little I knew of Occlumency, a split-second before the full wave of the attack hit me.

And it hit me blind with the force of a sledgehammer. I swayed, my jaw hung open loose, and my wand fell from my hand, clattering uselessly on the gravel road amongst the headstones.

Outwardly it appeared as if I'd been struck dizzy. Inwardly, my mind roared against the invasion, screamed vicious defiance, locked now in a fierce battle with some unknown entity.

Where was the attacker?

A bloody spike, barbed and blunt, was being driven into my skull, and I stood there for all the world like a statue.

“’ Arry, your wand.” Fleur met my eyes – she knew something was wrong,

I couldn’t speak – I couldn’t move. My eyes darted back and forth across the landscape. I managed to grit my teeth and ball my hands into fists. That burn from the demon sword had healed raw and tender. Squeezing my hand hurt, but the pain was merely the shadow of an afterthought.

Fleur ducked down and retrieved my wand. She knew I was in trouble, but all she had to go on was the fierce look on my face.

Whoever was doing this had to be close by... only this didn’t feel like normal mind-rape. There was no probing finger, no sifting presence, just a brute force attempt to crush my defences and unhinge an already loose mind. This was not Legilimency. No...

This was – this felt – older.

Old school.

Old world.

Which meant it should not be happening.

Atlantis and this world were still separated by 10,000 years of blood and war, still the best part of eternity away from each other, still lost in a maelstrom of rotting time—

It was the gravedigger. The man in the blue overalls and straw sombrero. Son of a bitch.

He was standing forty feet away, no longer digging in the dirt but leaning against his shovel, smiling from ear to ear and staring at me with that damned hat pushed back on his brow.

‘Harry James Potter...’

He was in my head. His sombrero tilted to the left, and my head mirrored the action. Neither of us broke eye contact, neither of us blinked.

‘Get out of my head...’ I snarled, my upper lip drawing back over my teeth.

Fleur had followed my gaze, her wand in hand. I saw her hesitate, wondering whether or not to hex the ‘Muggle’.

‘You always fail to see that which is right before your eyes, Harry James Potter. Yes, yes, you do.’ The gravedigger began to walk towards me, showing no sign of the strain that crippled me.

I knew who he was. Who it was. Yes, yes... ‘Chronos, you arsehole.’

‘At your service, Time Warrior. How many hours has it been since we last saw each other? It was the first time for you, was it not? Yes, yes, it was...’

The sight in my right eye was dimming under the strain. The light of the day seemed to bulge a sickly purple colour. My left eye remained unaffected, but the purple mess was spreading across my vision.

“” Arry, who is zat man?”

‘Tell me, Harry James Potter... how long? It was at the beautiful girl’s house, yes, yes, only—’

‘Twenty-two hours and thirty-seven minutes,’ I shouted with my mind. Our thoughts were bouncing back and forth along some invisible bonds of dark force. Yet I knew the time – I always knew the time. ‘What is it you want now?’

Chronos – for it was the mad bastard, the supposed demigod of Time, the supposed collector of ancient debt – laughed, but only in my head. ‘Give me the Atlantean cube. I’ve searched an age for that particular Key.’

‘No.’

The pressure on my mind seemed to double, to triple. My legs buckled but I didn’t fall, couldn’t fall, because the weight of my mind wouldn’t let me. I was too pissed off to fall, too. No one fucked with my head like this. Not even Voldemort anymore. I was too strong, too clever—

The purple blur across the right side of my vision was taking on a whole new level of crazy, throwing me even further off balance. Through my left eye the world was normal, bright and sunny, through the effected right I saw a tarnished sky, decaying and struck with crimson lightning, the tombstones were charred black and the grassy acreage of the cemetery strewn with ash.

Two glimpses of the world, one in each eye, and the nightmare was spreading. I could feel the purple malice itching in the corner of my left eye. I didn’t know what I was seeing... but it looked familiar.

“Stupefy!” Fleur cried, slashing her wand forward. The stunning spell burst from the shaft of wood and slammed into Chronos, as strong and as bright as any I’d ever seen.

Of course it didn’t work – that would be too fucking simple. The spell dissipated against Chronos’ chest, fading to nothing. The demon or whatever he was frowned in annoyance, however, and flicked his hand contemptuously at Fleur.

I heard her gasp before a wave of something invisible knocked her back off the path and onto the grass, tumbling like a rag doll into a tombstone.

‘BASTARD!’ I still couldn’t move, and the real world continued to slip away from my sight. It was half and half, and through the infected sight I saw the world behind the world, and the true monster that wore the sombrero and brandished a shovel before me. ‘Jesus Christ...’

‘New gods can’t help you now, Harry James Potter. Do you want to know why, yes, yes?’

He was hideous – a creature beyond comprehension. A monster of a nightmare caught somewhere between those Tweedledee bastards and a pile of vaguely human-shaped shit. I would've given all the gold in my vault to have my safe sight back, the bright world in the left. I wrenched my right eye closed, it took a supreme effort, and didn't make one bit of difference. The terror shone right through my eyelid.

‘Why then?’

‘Because you forsake the new ways, yes you do. Lives and lifetimes ago you chose the Old World to bring you back to this time and avert a world-wide extinction. You turned your back on the faith of the New World, yes, yes.’ Chronos laughed aloud. ‘You are alone against the remnants of Long Ago.’

‘The cube belongs to me – it's my Key.’

Chronos' face, the human face, turned ugly. He swept his shovel across the ground, drawing a line in the gravel. ‘I want to kill you today, Harry James Potter. The coin has flipped against you. You should have taken up the clockwork sword!’

‘I don't need a novelty sword to kick your arse.’

‘You are dead already – you were dead lifetimes ago, yes, yes.’ A deafening silence echoed across the expanse between us, between the real world and the nightmare claiming my sight. ‘Now give me... WHAT IS MINE!’

My briefcase had fallen to the ground at my feet during the initial onslaught, and at Chronos' words the clasp sprang open and several thousand dollars of American currency burst out of the open mouth, followed by my Invisibility Cloak and Miguel Blue's cube, caught amongst the silvery folds of the fabric.

‘I WARNED YOU! THEY CANNOT SAY I DIDN'T WARN YOU!’ The madman continued to scream without moving, to roar with just a smile on his face. We were two minds battling on a level of some

higher, hyper-reality. 'TIME, STUPID, STUPID TIME.' He raised his hand and the cube leapt into the air, flying towards him through the two conflicting views I had of the world.

'Not a chance!' I raised my own hand – without even doubting that I would not be able to – and felt for some unseen bond of power I knew was there. The cube came to an abrupt halt halfway between myself and Chronos, hanging in the air and spinning on its axis.

Chronos' eyes widened in disbelief, and I felt the pressure of his mind on mine slacken in sheer shock.

It was like holding a rope with my mind, similar to the thought needed to maintain a levitation spell – only without the wand. I didn't understand how I was doing it, but I hadn't doubted for a second that I could.

'No... NOO!'

He – It – was truly insane. And not the fun kind of insane.

Fleur was back on her feet, holding one hand to a nasty looking cut on her forehead that was sending blood streaming down her face. Head wounds always bled long and always bled hard.

The sight of Fleur's blood, seen through my good eye under the bright sun, and through my bad eye cast against a sky of roiling storm clouds, awoke in me that same raw desire to maim and kill that I'd been gripped by yesterday, when Chronos had held a blade to her throat.

'Very well,' the monster said. He was a monster, human or otherwise. His smiles and his dancing eyes were as fake as the shape he wore in the sunlight. 'Very well, since you must insist on resistance, Harry James Potter, she will die. AS PROMISED!'

I braced myself against the cold as Chronos slammed his shovel into the ground, driving it in as deep as the hilt, and a wash of freezing-cold air exploded outwards from the impact. Frost formed on the

metal cube floating between us, amongst the curvy runes and the lesser marks of Atlantis.

Fleur cried out, and I snapped my head to the left, taking my eyes off of Chronos. She was standing just before one of the old tombstones, alive but injured, yet it was not the cold or the sight of her blood which forced a scream from her lungs.

It was the skeletal arm that gripped her ankle.

The arm that had erupted out of the ground at her feet – an arm belonging to someone long dead.

Holy shit.

Chronos was laughing, or screaming, and I couldn't tell if it was in my head or in my ears that I heard him. Fighting the strain, I forced my neck back around to look him in the eye.

'You're fucked, Harry James Potter,' he said, as petulant as a child. 'OH WE ARE ALL FUCKING FUCKED!' The demon found that amusing, throwing his head back and laughing so hard that he lost the sombrero.

I had to break free of his mind – there was no time for anything less now. But I couldn't let the cube go, not to the madman. For Voldemort to gain Atlantis was one thing, for this creature to do the same was the end of the road...

But Fleur was in trouble—No, if I didn't do something, Fleur was fucked.

I saw the cemetery through two conflicting views, yet in both I saw the dead clawing their way out of their eternal prisons... The Dead Shall Be Raised. Fleur was screaming, trying to pull her leg free from the inhuman grasp of a corpse.

There were hundreds of them, the grass was bulging under the strain of the desecration, and I was caught without my wand, facing a creature I didn't understand. Slabs of stone – tombstones – were

toppling, or were thrown into the air by the blind rage of the once-human creatures rising from the cold and the dark beneath the earth.

What was my next move? My right arm felt as if it would break at any moment, pop clean out of my shoulder, as Chronos pulled at the cube, still laughing and screaming:

‘FUCKED, FUCKED, FUCKED, FUCKED, FUCKED...’

He was having a really good time as the legions of the dead surrounded us.

Damn. Two minutes ago Fleur and I had been laughing in the sun.

Now I wished I’d had that bourbon for breakfast.

~~*~*

A/N: There we go, folks. One healthy update. There were a few stops and a starts in this chapter, which is why in part it took a bit longer to update. No matter though! You have just read it. Please review and tell me what you think! Tear it apart, folks. Next update soon,

Joe

Chapter 15 – I'll Write You a Tragedy

Part Six – The Murderer

So when he'd finished speakin', he turned back towards the window,
Crushed out his cigarette and faded off to sleep.
And somewhere in the darkness, The Gambler, he broke even.
But in his final words I found an ace that I could keep.

~~Kenny Rogers

~~*~*

It didn't turn out okay at all.

And yet the world keeps turning, the universe grows ever colder... All
the wondrous majesty of creation is blind to the sad plight of our
humanity. The goddamn infernal machines fall silent.

It didn't turn out okay at all.

It was never supposed to.

~~*~*

FRENCH PRESIDENT LAURENT ASSASSINATED.
BOY WHO LIVED ON THE RUN.

Special Correspondent Ian Lyterman

PARIS. THREE P.M. The French Esplanade welcomes the
return of their magical leader from recent trade talks
in the east with the oriental shamans. President Thomas
Laurent, 62, pictured here just moments before his death,
shakes hands with representatives of the Indonesian
People's Republic of Magic. Surrounded by Aurors and
personal hit-wizards, a contingent of the finest magical
law enforcement in France, the leader of the nation for
the past seven years, smiled for the public and for the
camera.

A heartbeat later and a flash of green light, as frigid and as sheer as ice, Thomas Laurent falls to the floor, a shuddering wave of disbelief forcing an abject silence upon the crowds. The silence was abruptly broken and the tragedy compounded by the fierce and merciless laughter of a raven-haired young man many might recognise as Harry James Potter, the Boy Who Lived.

Local reporter Gill Dronas, on scene as the crisis unfolded, told the National Quill that she had witnessed the young assailant fire the Killing Curse that ended Thomas Laurent's life.

"I couldn't believe it at first, that it was happening at all," Ms Dronas said. "Harry Potter, or someone who looked very much like him, appeared out of nowhere, and was gone a moment later. He must have apparated, but that's impossible within the Esplanade."

Other witnesses claim the dark-haired figure pictured below moments after Laurent's assassination was Harry Potter, marked by his infamous scar.

Further rumours are abound that Harry Potter resisted arrest and eluded Aurors late last night, at the home of wizarding representative, Ambassador Delacour. Inan attempt to locate Potter, the British Ministry....

Cont. p2.

Holding the wizarding newspaper in one hand, a beer in the other, I read through the article again, watching the photograph move – watching Thomas Laurent fall and a figure that looked very much like me laugh at the scene before fading away. Even the wand in the shot resembled my phoenix and holly stick.

Damn.

Damn it all.

Someone was playing the game to win. Someone wanted me discredited in this world, and to fall in another...

I had to assume it was Chronos and Saturnia, my newest enemies. The goblins had never done this before, Voldemort would want the world to know it was him, if he did it, and Miguel Blue (who was still to become an enemy) had no reason to distrust me just yet. He hadn't even met me when this went down.

My hotel room was bleak, the sky outside above the bustling metropolis of New York was bruised with heavy storm clouds. An unexpected storm at the height of summer, threatening rain and worse. Whatever the cause for the weather, it mirrored my mood perfectly. I was depressed, dreary, and set to burst with furious resolve at any moment.

The skin on my arms and my face was sore, almost red-raw to the touch. The residual damage of my battle with Chronos that morning. I was burnt, sun-scorched, and no remedy could heal the skin early. The fire that had done this had no measure, and I was useless at healing spells anyway.

If only Fleur could have done... but no, that wasn't worth thinking about. Poor Fleur.

Lives and lifetimes had been lost and spent, gone into thinking about what could'a, should'a, would'a been – if I could do things differently. Nothing ever changed, only the manner in which we all died.

In fire.

In blood and screaming fire.

Always at the whim of one madman or another.

And those thoughts left nothing. Less than nothing. What did I always find at World's End, on the plains of Oblivica beyond the Wastelands of Time? What was left to save now, after seeing it all end so many times before? My headache was relentless. What was left save regret and the bitter certainty that there would be no better tomorrow.

Not this side of hell.

At least I still had the cube. That was an encouraging thought. I could still breach Atlantis. But every hour seemed to weigh on my shoulders, making it that much harder. Death was no escape, not for me, which left only that bitter certainty, that terrible resolve to keep going.

“Good beer,” I mumbled, and drained the bottle, standing and thinking – thinking and standing. In a sudden move I flung the beer bottle across the room. It shattered against the far wall, cracking the pane of glass in the wall clock.

Trying to stop time, Harry?

No, no. Trying to kill Time, once and for all.

Time isn't real, I told myself. In a voice that sounded faintly like Dumbledore, of all people.

Time was real enough. Damn it all. I had to keep smiling, to keep fighting. Because there was no one else, no one else who had any idea of what was to come, what had already come. Atlantis was rising.

The Old World was spilling over the border into the New. At the head of the chaos stood Voldemort, my greatest enemy – my greatest challenge.

In the days to come there would be change, and I'd have to go on alone – no companions, no Fleur, no Tonks – and do the dark things that had to be done. Was I setting myself up for failure? Probably.

The Atlantean Cube, a music box of sorts, and the Key to the Past, glittered faintly in the light on the bedside table. My struggle with Chronos for the cube had left more than physical burns on my body.

It had left me feeling weak, useless, unable to protect those I cared for...

I'm sorry, Fleur, for doing what I did.

God, I'm sorry. So fucking sorry.

I played the events over again in my mind. I let the morning unfold as it had done, making an appointment to see Jason Arnair, leaving Yale University and heading back into Grove Street Cemetery to apparate away in secret. Chronos gripping my mind... forcing me to see him for what he was... the dead rising... a skeletal hand gripping Fleur's beautiful ankle...

Then what had happened?

My headache sent the pounding blows of a sledgehammer into my skull, back and forth, never weakening, never ceasing. Then what had happened?

I'd made a mistake.

~~*~*

If in doubt, you've got to make it sound convincing. The truth, that is.

But to go there is a mistake. As the Infernal Clock winds down to nothing, and the dominant primordial beast arises, you will learn that all can never be silent.

Not in the Halls of Time.

~~*~*

My vision was split right down the middle.

Through my left eye, I saw a bright summer's day.

Through my right, I saw a post-apocalyptic wasteland.

Yet through both eyes I saw a legion of corpses clawing up from under the cold earth. Through both eyes I watched hundreds and hundreds of necromanced rotting bodies surround Fleur and me and the laughing, spluttering demigod – Chronos.

Fucking necromancy. Inferi, the soulless, zombies, Hufflepuffs, the undead – call them what you will – it was a desecration against everything I knew to be true and right. To be just. A raw, primal, instinctual rage, as red-hot as burning coals, descended over my otherwise calm demeanour.

That rage – a rage that had ended the world in blind arrogance more than once, a rage that could annihilate and kill and disrupt the flow of time, a rage as raw as sin – was only intensified by the cries of Fleur Delacour, trying desperately to pull her leg clear of the dirty, flesh-ridden hand that had risen from beneath her feet.

To put that rage bluntly, I wanted to fuck some shit up.

‘What move to make next, Harry James Potter?’ Chronos was still laughing, still miles clear of sanity and heading straight to the heart of crazy town juggling TNT. ‘Surrender the Key, save the girl, yes, yes?’

His voice shuddered through my mind. The hold he had on me, as brutal as legilimency but somehow so much worse, like jagged hooks digging deep furrows across my brain, shook and spun. ‘No.’

Chronos stopped laughing. ‘But you can’t defy me.’

‘Oh?’

‘I’ll kill you both, if you do.’ He sounded honestly perplexed. Sweat stuck his dark brown locks to his all-too-human forehead.

Seen through my right eye, I saw Chronos for the demon he truly was. Sick and disgusting, bulging brown flesh slick with viscous slime. I understood the terror of his form, what I couldn’t understand was his mind. I knew a little about insanity (voice of experience, ya know) but this was different – alien.

I didn't want to know what he was. I found myself dreading it with a morbid curiosity, like being unable to look away from a hideous train wreck.

I laughed at his affront. "Chronos," I said aloud for the whole damned world to hear. "Don't you know who I am? I'm Harry fuckin' Potter!"

I may not have been able to understand Chronos' alien mind, but I understood my own all too well. I'd had lifetimes of practice, after all, and the glaciers of burning ice screaming all day every day through my brain could not be restrained for long.

I brought those memories of Before, of lives from long ago, to the forefront of my mind and snapped whatever tenuous link had been binding me to Chronos, to the ground, but not to the Atlantean cube. That I still held with what I supposed was a touch of wandless magic. What else could it have been?

Chronos recoiled as if struck – his hold on my mind broken under the weight of all the unleashed memory. It was too much to hold, even for a 'god'. The cube spun, lurched towards me, I lunged forward and snatched it out of the air. At the same time, I clicked the fingers of my free hand, bending thought into will, and my wand sprang up from the gravel and into my palm.

"INCENDIOS GRATA!" I cried, shooting a raw blast of magical fire at Chronos. Thick tendrils of super-hot flame erupted across his chest, absorbing his blue overalls and obscuring the man, the demon, from view.

I spun on the spot, towards Fleur, working fast. I was dizzy from the conflicting views in my separate eyes, but the nightmare was fading now, receding across my vision. Chronos' hold, his magic, was broken. Good.

"INCENDIO!" Fleur had her wand pointed at the rotten arm holding her ankle, having finally overcome her initial shock. The fire her wand produced was hot enough to blast the undead arm away.

But there were plenty more clawing for purchase – for living flesh. And with only two wands between us... The entire cemetery had risen, the air stank of rot and dust, of mud and the deep places of the earth. How could this be happening with the sun shining so brightly overhead?

The end of the world was a quiet place, but to get there the dead had to rise, the oceans had to run red with blood, and Voldemort had to unleash Atlantis and the nightmares of the Old World. This shouldn't be happening. Chronos, Saturnia, should not be happening. More and more I was feeling out of my depth, scraping through by the skin of my teeth—

Chronos surged forward, murder in his eyes. The smoke cleared around him and I saw my fire had scorched his skin, burnt away his hair. Yet even as Fleur joined me at my side, his flesh began to clear, his hair grow back. Whatever he was, though, he could be hurt. I'd proven that much.

"You're no more of a god than I," I said, a despicable scorn coating every one of my words.

"No?" Chronos seemed to give that some consideration. Consideration that was oddly sane. "And are you not a god, Harry James Potter? Yes, yes? You bend Lady Time herself to your will, you die and yet rise from the dead – you choose who lives and who dies – what more, to make a god, hmm?"

Fleur was mindful of the dead, of the inferi, slowly shambling towards us. Yet still she heard Chronos' words, and sent me a very curious glance. And why not? The bastard was telling her, however obscurely, all my terrible secrets.

"Undo the necromancy, leave us alone, and we both walk away, Chronos." My sight had returned to normal. My mind was my own, as much as it could be...

All traces of the insanity had left Chronos' face, his tone. He seemed regretful, sad... even tired. "The cube."

I shoved the Key to the Past back into my briefcase at my feet, keeping my wand trained on the supposed god. "I need it – I think you know why."

"Aye." He nodded. "I will kill her then, Harry James Potter, as promised."

I stepped in front of Fleur. Her breathing was heavy, her hair ruffled, her scent washed over me as it always did. Strawberries and rainfall. It was refreshing. "I will have to stop you. And I now know you can bleed, whatever it is you are." The zombies were getting mighty close.

"And you will not find me easy prey," Fleur said, brandishing her wand behind me.

I grinned. Fiercely proud of her. "You see, it's far too early in the day, in the summer, for this. Chronos, what do you and Saturnia want from me?"

Chronos paused, staring straight at me, and then raised his hand before him. All at once every inferi, every stumbling corpse, stopped moving. We were surrounded by a silent, weary-looking army of the dead. The various stages of decomposition, the missing limbs and ragged clothes, made for an ugly audience. But it was an audience that wasn't about to rip us apart now – not yet, at least.

The 'god' before me sighed. "Time..." he said. "We want the Old World to rise from the ashes of the New. We want you to die and stay dead. We want the hands of the Infernal Clock to move only ever forward. What we want, Harry James Potter, is to know what you are!"

I snorted. "Me?" There was a pause, a pause where anything could happen – and was about to. "Me... Well, I'm kind of a big deal! Sil-othism!"

White-hot fire burst to life at the tip of my wand, a needle of super-heated flame – the same I had used to carve the Atlantean runes into beer bottles last night – and I fell to one knee, plunging fire into the gravel at my feet. It only took two seconds, if that, as I cut through the stone like butter – swift and sure slashes.

I'd drawn a rune. And not just any rune. One full of jagged edges and malevolence.

I leapt back as my cuts in the gravel road began to shine, to glow with blue light. A tremendous wave of heat erupted from within the rune, and Chronos began to scream. He recognised the magic. With a wave of his hand he unleashed the inferi. The undead army surged towards me and Fleur.

"Chronos," I called above the demigod's screams and the cracking of a thousand dusty bones, "meet the Old World, meet the rune Az-reth." I laughed, I laughed so fucking hard as I grabbed Fleur and pulled her tight against me. "Stay close," I whispered. "Stay low..."

I pulled her over to the grass, away from the road, and shielded her body with my own as a light – and a heat – strong enough to eclipse the sun exploded in front of Chronos and his army of the dead. The light was blinding, the eruption deafening...

I had unleashed Fiendfyre.

True Fiendfyre. None of that watered down crap that was all the magical world could manage these days... Old school magic was the trick. Old school Dark magic.

"Aquamenti!" I said, and a deluge of water flowed from the tip of my wand, drenching Fleur and me from head to toe. "Keep doing that!" I screamed into Fleur's ear, waiting for her nod before turning back to the chaos I had just unleashed.

Fiendfyre was dark magic, no question there, and it took sheer resolve and terrible intent to control it once it was unleashed. If I let this magic run unchecked, then it would obliterate everything for miles

– including the thousands of people across the road, at Yale. I could feel the magic even now, as it built up to erupt, straining to break free of my intent.

“Not a chance...” I whispered, as creatures of living fire began to appear.

From the rune a torrent of flame, a thick column of heat, reached for the sky. The flame took shape, bulging and growling. The cemetery became starved of oxygen as the Fyre split into three screeching phoenixes.

Almost graceful in their elegance, the Fiendfyre took flight, tearing through the air on the wings of my intent. Two of the three giant, flaming phoenixes, feathers of burning golden flame trailing in their wake, I sent to spin around us, eating into the ranks of the undead.

It was chaos.

Mere anarchy loosed upon the world.

“CHRONOS!” I roared, raising both my arms as Fleur drenched us again in cool water, battering away the heat. Already it began to evaporate. I could feel my skin crisping. It felt good though, clean – just burning away the sin. “Stop me if you’ve heard this one...”

The third phoenix, hovering in the air just before me, between me and the furious demigod, the collector of Time’s debts, Chronos the dick, waited with barely constrained rage. My rage. It wanted to attack, to burn and feed on much needed fuel.

I’d done this – so why deny the fyre what it wanted?

“One dark night two men were walking home and decided to take a shortcut through the cemetery. You know, just for laughs... ha-ha-ha!” I spun my wand in swift circles, the two phoenixes sweeping through the waves of zombies gaining speed, absorbing energy from the grass and the trees and the flesh and the bone.

“Stop this!” Chronos demanded.

I unleashed the third phoenix, feeling the burn now as Fleur splashed us again with a deluge of cool water. It flew with purpose, blackening the gravel road and turning the dust to ash. A thick column of super-heated energy, blazing with all the fury of time. It descended upon Chronos as a creature rising from the depths of a very dark hell.

It hit a purple shield, a disc of vibrating energy, and once again I was locked in contest against this man in the sombrero, forcing my will against his. Why wasn't I afraid? Why was it so hard to be afraid anymore?

“Anyway, right in the middle of the cemetery they were startled by a tap-tap-tapping noise coming from the misty shadows.” I urged the fyre onwards, as the other two phoenixes moved outwards in concentric circles, leaving only ash and blackened earth in their wake. “Trembling with fear, they found an old man with a hammer and chisel, chipping away at one of the headstones.”

“You will burn for this, Harry James Potter! I swear it, on the grace of the Infernal Clock it—”

“’ Holy shit, mister,’ one of the men said after catching his breath.” I was dripping from head to toe in water again. Fleur was standing so close, her breath as cold on my neck as the heat of the fire was hot on my face. “You scared us half to death – we thought you were a ghost! What are you doing here so late at night?”

Chronos fell to his knees. He had no real power, nothing to withstand what I understood of the Old World. Perhaps that's why he and Saturnia wanted Atlantis, so they could claim the magic there for themselves... and truly become gods. Splinters of white light began to appear in his flimsy purple shield, as my fiery phoenix pecked away at it.

“The old man turned to look at the men. ‘Those fools,’ he grumbled. ‘They misspelled my name!’ Ha-ha! Get it? He’s a zombie. It’s funny ‘cause it’s apt!”

My phoenix engulfed the man-shaped demon across the road and his screams rose higher and burned deeper than any of the flames raging across Grove Street Cemetery.

I called my other two creations into check, making it look easy. I was about ready to pass out. If Chronos wasn't defeated... I wouldn't be able to manage a stunning spell. Well, maybe a stunning spell, but certainly nothing on the level that could stop a Bone-Man, or Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the Orc-Mare.

The fyre fought me, screaming in my head to unleash it upon the world and all the flammable flesh over the street at the university. Quite a crowd was gathering through the haze, I could see, no one coming close because of the tremendous heat. With a supreme effort, focusing my dwindling intent, I blinked the Fiendfyre out of existence.

Ash began to fall on the cemetery like snow.

There wasn't a corpse left standing from Chronos' army of the dead. There wasn't a corpse left buried under the earth, either. The Wizarding Congress was going to have a hard time memory-charming this one away. Ah, there's a thought... Aurors would be on their way.

Still, I had to see...

Fleur followed close as I walked over to what remained of Chronos. For wonder, for wonder, he was still alive – I wasn't surprised. He was propped up against a stump of charcoal that had, until moments ago, been a very healthy spruce tree.

"That... that wasn't funny," Chronos said. His flesh was glowing like coals in the embers of a grill. His eyes were still batshit-insane, however, even as he began to fade.

"No... no I suppose it wasn't." A sheepish grin came and went across my face. A grin that never reached my eyes. "Couldn't think of

any jokes to do with fire or stupid hats... sorry. When can I expect to see you again?"

Chronos may have been grinning, too, I couldn't tell through the blackened husk of his form. Although even that had begun to heal... fresh skin blooming over the burns. Damn. His form was transparent, and I could see one of those razor-sharp tears in the air that had cut me in Diagon Alley nearly a week ago. So he was responsible for whatever they were, as well...

"Impressive fire, yes, yes," he whispered, and chuckled. "The same fire burns in your eyes, Harry Potter, as you stare at me now. Can you see it, beautiful lady?" The scorched creature cracked his melted neck, gazing at Fleur.

"I..." Fleur looked at me. If the Fiendfyre hadn't burned our skin bright red, I imagined she would've looked quite pale.

"Don't listen," I said, as gently as I could.

"See Time's fire burning in his eyes?" Chronos laughed – but it was a sad laugh. "And what's behind that fire, I wonder? You gaze at me with flame enough to set the world alight, yet behind the flame, there is nothing."

My fists were clenched. "Atlantis is mine." Chronos' form had almost disappeared entirely, a tear in reality that only I could see marking the spot where he was fading away. "I expected more from you, buddy..."

Those insane eyes, that no doubt saw my own in the same ridiculous way, closed almost regretfully. "We've only just begun our true battle... just getting warmed up, yes, yes." He coughed, his body a mixed fusion of burnt flesh and healthy skin. "We were right to fear you, Harry James Potter," he said at last.

And then he was gone. I doubt I could have done anything to stop him.

~~*~*

I wanted cities in the sky. I wanted kingdoms under the ocean. I wanted to discover new parts of the world on par with sighting the coast of an unknown continent.

I wanted a reckless night of adventure – where the taste of blood in my mouth after a fight or a fall told me that I was still alive.

I wanted to pull away the front of the so-called ‘real world’ and see what was behind the curtain... I found darkness.

And a Clock on the face of Hell.

~~*~*

“Good morning, Professor,” I said, taking a seat in Jason Arnair’s office, amidst the stacks of books and bulging filing cabinets. “Thank you for seeing me so promptly.”

A tall man sat opposite me. He was young, although his hairline had receded somewhat, giving him that aged college-professor look. Eyes of pure intelligence regarded me from in front of a mind that I couldn’t begin to understand. I sat opposite a genius, a Muggle man whose memory was so ordered, so perfect, it made mine look like a train wreck... more of a train wreck.

“I expected someone older, Mr. Smith,” Arnair replied, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “Grace had said you were accompanied by an older woman yesterday, when you stopped by...?” There was a hint of a question there.

“I’m here alone today,” I said. Even now I could still smell the smoke on the air, the burning sulphur, and taste the ash of the fire that had gutted Grove Street Cemetery across the way. “I hear there was an accident yesterday morning. Some sort of explosion?”

“Yes,” Grace Connor said. The young graduate student sat to my left, all Brunette curls and blue eyes. “An unfortunate incident at the

cemetery across the street. The fire brigade thinks it may have been arson.”

“Really?” I admired her small, secret smile. I’d met this woman before, in other lives, but she’d never been more than a passing interest. I was more interested this time. “Professor Arnair.” I turned my attention back to the man I had come to see. “You recently gave a talk on Old World Mythology.”

“I did, yes.” His tone was polite, but I think he thought it clear that I was wasting his time. “Focusing on the mythical lost city of Atlantis, and proposing a factual basis to support evidence that it did in fact, a very long time ago, exist.”

I nodded, and reached down to unbuckle my tarnished, slightly burnt, briefcase. From within I removed the Atlantean Cube and placed it carefully on the desk between Arnair and myself. “Ta-da...”

I watched the professor’s eyes take in the cube, widening as he recognised the runes from whatever obscure texts he had studied across the years, no doubt matching them to the Voynich Manuscript – which also rested in my briefcase, but he didn’t know that...

“What is this?” he asked. “Where did you find it?”

“This,” I said, leaning forward in my chair. “Is one of the few relics that remain of the Lost City of Atlantis, Professor.”

“What?” He looked up sharply, searching my face. “Impossible. It exists? Where?”

“That’s why I’ve come to you,” I said, and that was the truth. “I represent a... group of individuals that are funding an expedition to breach and recover the remains of Atlantis, before a rival faction can claim the history there for themselves.”

“Really?” Arnair was far from sold, although a glimmer of interest flared behind his wire-framed glasses. “And why do you need me?”

“You’re one of the world’s foremost experts on the Old World.” Right after me, Voldemort, the goblins, Dumbledore, and probably Saturnia and Chronos. “And we have certain texts that need deciphering, certain strings of ancient code that make little sense... I need your very clever mind, Jason.”

“Well, if that’s true, then I’ll need to see expedition plans, talk about the funding and the rights of the find, speak to whoever is in charge—”

“All in good time,” I said, and perhaps there was a hint of a threatening edge to the way I said that. Both Jason and Grace sat up a little straighter in their chairs. “You have to understand there is a certain element of danger associated with what we are doing. The less you know – for now – the safer you and I, and Miss Connor here, will be.”

Jason Arnair had, more than once, been my friend across many of my other lives. He was the only way to successfully breach Atlantis in enough time to thwart Voldemort of most of the city’s vast powerbase.

“And yet all you offer in the way of proof, Mr. Smith, is this cube?” Arnair shook his head. “The runes and etchings marking the casing are indeed of Old World origin, but they could have been carefully manufactured. My research has led me to believe that Atlantis was the capital city of a great nation nearly ten thousand years ago, and that these people not only mastered navigation of the seas millennia before the Egyptians built the pyramids, but managed feats of rudimentary flight.” Arnair chuckled. “What have you to say to that?”

I shrugged. He was right – way off base in the details, but he was right. Atlantis had been that and more. It had been the first superpower, and still kind of was... I reached down into my briefcase.

“I think I’ve perked your interest, Professor Arnair, so I’ve said all I’m going to say.” There was another way into Atlantis, after all, a darker way, if this man decided not to help me. He would though, his curiosity always got the better of him. It had killed him more than once. Killed me. Killed everyone. “Do you know where Latium is?”

He nodded. "In Italy – although Latium is the ancient name for the area around Tivoli. Latin was born there, one of the core language databases. Why do you ask?"

"Can I borrow that pen? Thanks." I wrote a quick note on a piece of paper from the pile in front of me. It was some student's research paper from the looks of things. "This is where I need you to be, one week from now, in Italy." From my briefcase I had removed fifty-thousand dollars in American currency. "This is fifty-thousand dollars," I said, "in American currency. For a plane ticket, accommodation, travel expenses, and a fair amount left over for your services."

Arnair stared at the money and then back up at me. "You think Atlantis... is in Latium?"

I nodded. "Something like that... I'm asking for one day of your time, Professor. I think you believe that this cube is a relic of Atlantis, and after next week you can have it for study, if you wish, but I need you to be in Italy on this day, to help decipher those codes I was talking about."

He was tempted, I could see, he always was. So was the woman, Grace, if I could tell anything by the gleam in her eye. She really was quite attractive, but I had to keep my mind on the job...

"This is all very strange... and far from proper," Arnair said. "Is this a black-market expedition? Because I'll tell you now, I'll not help rape a possible archaeological site of this significance."

I stood up to leave – I picked up the cube and left the money in its place. "Then I'll hopefully see you in one week, to make sure that doesn't happen. As you can see," I waved the cube around before dropping it back into the briefcase, "we've found something, who knows what else is to be found?" I paused for a moment, already thinking about my next move. "It was a pleasure to meet you. Goodbye."

~~*~*

You've said you wanted revenge... yet you fear regret. Because regrets are forever.

Perhaps what you want is not so much revenge, as justice.

That's a bad idea. People will die. It's always a mess.

~~*~*

Fresh rainfall and strawberries.

As close as I could come to describing the scent in the flick of her hair, the scent of the light perspiration on her skin... Fleur Delacour.

Fresh rainfall and strawberries.

I was alone in my hotel room, having just returned from my meeting with Jason Arnair, and already making the plan to depart from New York. A new copy of the National Quill rested on the bedside table, and I was still front page news worldwide. Rumour had it I was in Italy, France, had been sighted in Dover, and had gone into hiding in the U.S.

The Ministry and Congress that controlled the press didn't know where I was, but that didn't mean Dumbledore didn't – or the goblins. Certainly, Saturnia and Chronos knew where to find me... those bitches were tracking me using the blood she'd taken... what was to stop them leading my enemies straight to my door?

Nothing. Except more and more I was beginning to think they wanted me on the run, closing in on Atlantis far more quickly than I usually do... but why? Because they did not know how to find it – I did.

Some things remained sacred, it seemed. Only just.

My bed was covered with the contents of my briefcase. I was taking stock. There were stacks of cash in varying currency, my two special manuscripts recently liberated from Nepal and Yale respectively, my

Invisibility Cloak, the two bottles of shiny starlight, the Atlantean Cube, and that was about it... The briefcase itself was on its last legs. It had taken the same beatings I had this last week.

I was shirtless, bare-chested save for the sparkling Time-Turner dangling around my neck, having removed the bandages from my side and allowing the stitches room to breathe. The skin was enflamed red, but there were no signs of infection. A crust of blood made the stab wound look like nothing more than a scratch, but it still stung like a motherfu—

Knock! Knock!

I stepped lightly across the carpet and opened the door, already knowing who it would be.

Strawberries and rainfall, as fresh as they come.

“’ Arry,” Fleur said, her platinum hair at odds with her sunburnt skin. We’d both taken the heat from the Fiendfyre remarkably well. “Eet iz done.”

“Come in,” I said. It was good to see her. We’d been apart for the best part of a day, ever since yesterday afternoon upon our return from Grove Street Cemetery. We’d had an argument, and I’d asked a favour. “Did you have enough galleons?”

“Oui, yes. More than enough.” Miguel Blue’s gold, the crime lord’s two thousand galleons, had been put to good use.

After Chronos’ attack, Fleur had been enraged, furious, that I had done something as foolish as to use Fiendfyre. It had been a mistake – more than overkill. I knew that. At the time, I knew that, but I wanted the immortal bastard to get the message – I was no easy game.

Fleur had been furious and more than a little afraid. I had gone from telling her about Voldemort’s use of dark magic over dinner, to employing the use of some of my own the next morning. Coupled with what she understood of my connection with the Dark Lord, and I must

look, more often than not, quite insane. On par with that murdering psycho, Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Perhaps I was. Who could tell? Was it insane to try and save the world time and time again? Save it with such destructive fire? What else could I do?

“When will it all be delivered?” I asked, as Fleur frowned at my bare chest – at the wound, and at the mess all over my bed.

“Zis afternoon, before three. I paid extra to ensure zat.”

“Good work.” I nodded. That meant I could get to work on the portkeys back to Italy. This time we wanted to stay below the radar. For the most part that could be done, but an illegal international portkey would attract attention in and around our destination. Couldn’t be helped.

“What iz zat?” Fleur asked, pointing at the soft glow emanating from my sealed beer bottles.

I grinned. “Something hotter than that fyre yesterday.” Fleur wasn’t amused. I cleared my throat. “That’s starlight, Fleur. Pure starlight. We’ll be making some more tonight, so I can show you how it’s done, if you like.”

“Starlight... very well.”

The silence that followed was deafening. I wanted to say so many things. I wanted to kiss the woman before me, throw her down on the bed amongst the fragile and explosive bottles of energetic starlight. But most of all I wanted her forgiveness, her understanding... not that my actions could be understood. Even I knew Fiendfyre was an insane choice.

Oh well.

“Did you speak to ze Muggle professor?”

I fell out of my thoughts, caught myself staring at Fleur, and looked away. "Oui, Fleur." I sighed. "I'll understand if you want to head home tonight, instead of going on to Atlantis."

Fleur sat herself down carefully on the edge of my bed. Her legs, wrapped in black stockings, were all curves and angles that I struggled hard not to stare at. She seemed to taste my words before responding. "Did you 'ave to be so reckless, 'Arry?" she eventually asked. "You 'ave used such magic, such dark magic, before, non?"

I nodded. "Only ever in self-defence." Well, that was a lie... a pre-emptive attack or two had kept me alive long enough to die in the past. Hell, I'd used the Cruciatus Curse on Bellatrix Lestrange in a fit of blind anger.

A single tear fell from the corner of Fleur's perfect eye and I found myself hating what I had done, even as a part of me enjoyed the heat of the flame and the sheer raw power I was capable of. I wonder if that's what Voldemort felt when he unleashed his strength? No doubt it was.

"I want to see Atlantis, 'Arry. I want to see it with you." She stopped and took a deep breath, wiping away the tear gently. "But at what cost, hmm? Is eet worth the danger, or should I be going home? Do you want me here with you, questioning your every move? I understand that you 'ave enemies, and zat they are very, very dangerous, but the way you fight... eet iz insane!"

"I—"

"You destroyed zat cemetery," Fleur continued, working herself up to pissed off. "And what did zat man, Chronos, what did he mean when he said you 'ad already died? Zat you live again? How did he use magic without a wand? Who is he, zis man that 'as threatened my life twice now?"

I didn't know where to begin, what to answer first, and what to carefully deflect attention away from. How much longer could I keep my true self concealed, when creatures of uncertain mortality blabbed

my terrible secrets for the whole world to hear? Damn it all, was I going to have to come clean? Maybe yes... but then again... maybe no.

“I don’t understand half of what he said.” I guess I was going with a lie, for now. “And I don’t know who, or what, he is. But he’s not human, Fleur.” That felt like the truth. I hoped to god he wasn’t human. Humans could do some terrible things. “He’s the bad guy, and we’re the good guys. And fire’s fire, Fleur, there’s no putting it in simple terms of light and dark.”

“You managed to say a lot and say absolutely nothing at ze same time.” Fleur held my gaze and then gave me a sad smile. “What iz so terrible that you cannot tell even me, ‘Arry Potter? We ‘ave been through a lot together in ze last few days.”

And right then I did want to tell Fleur everything. Tell her everything and scare her away, because if she thought the last few days, the few scant skirmishes we had been in, was a lot then she was in for a helluva surprise if she stuck with me. We had yet to battle Death Eaters and Voldemort, commanding the skeletal armies of the Old World. Such nightmare was yet to come...

Such awful nightmare.

But I wanted her with me. As selfish as it was, I wanted her around. I needed the company, to keep me honest and to remind me why I do the things I do.

“Fleur, I...” I’m a time-traveller, from the future – from dozens of futures – and I sold my godforsaken soul for a slice of immortality in order to stop the end of the world. Only it isn’t working anymore, and every time I travel back I only make things worse. What’s terrible this time is that I don’t have another chance. Having my ragged soul and body exploded and propelled back through time at the speed of light multiple times has finally taken its toll. I can barely see straight through the headache and the torrents of fiery memories burning through my mind... “I’m going to have to ask you to trust me, for now, with a promise that you’ll find some answers at Atlantis, not before.”

Fleur nodded, clearly expecting no less from me. "Eet all comes back to Atlantis, doesn't eet, 'Arry?"

I blinked. Did it? "Well, it has to. Can't let Voldemort get a hold on such power."

"What power?"

"Lost magic, for the most part." I shrugged, and sat down next to Fleur on my bed, close enough to embrace her. I dared not. "A few artefacts that could do some damage. I don't really know, just what I've managed to gleam through research and my..." I tapped my forehead. "...connection."

The silence was more comfortable this time. I got the feeling Fleur had forgiven me for destroying the cemetery yesterday. Or decided to give me the benefit of the doubt on the whole insanity thing. Either way...

"How is your side?" she asked.

"Better," I said, holding a hand over my stitches. "Healing slowly but surely, the Muggle way."

"I still cannot believe you stitched yourself together in my bathroom. I was nearly sick." Her eyes said she found it more amusing now, than anything else.

I smiled. "I've always gotta do things that hard way, huh."

"Oui, but you can be forgiven some stupidity."

"Oh, stupidity is it, now? Miss Delacour, your words betray your intentions."

Fleur smiled too, and shuffled a pace closer to me on the edge of the bed. "And what do you know of my intentions, 'Arry Potter?" she asked softly.

Oh and that sent my heart racing. I felt for sure that Fleur would see it trying to beat its way out of my bare chest. “Stupid of you to ask,” I replied, tilting my head to one side. Was this one of those moments without time? It was beginning to feel so...

Fleur’s smile turned gentle, secret. “Stupid?” she whispered. “Well, for some stupid reason I find myself caring what you think, ‘Arry...”

I didn’t know what to say, not to that. I felt my age, like a nervous fifteen year old teenager who knew little of women and even less of seduction – one and the same most of the time. What could I say? Should I just damn the consequences and lean forward to kiss—

Fleur stood up. The moment had passed. She gazed down at me, as if reading my mind, and placed one careful hand on my shoulder. Her touch was like ice and fire, electric and powerful. “Eet is always stupid to hesitate, ‘Arry,” she said.

And I guess I could make what I wanted out of that. Words laced with delicate meaning. Fleur closed my door gently behind herself, disappearing off to her own room and leaving me with my racing thoughts.

Damn it all.

Stupid to hesitate. Yes, yes it was. But then I was only fifteen, barely old enough to shave... a week away from sixteen. Then again, Fleur only had two years on me, why did I hesitate?

“Because I’m an idiot,” I said, shaking my head clear of Fleur. Easier said than done. “Need to make the damn portkeys...”

There was something to do. Portkeys to Italy, to Latium, coming right up.

~~*~*

Time will not wait. No matter how hard you hold on.

It will escape you.

~~*~*

Before leaving I made sure to pack the replenished stock in the mini-bar into the chest that had, until recently, been home to two thousand galleons. I needed to jump in the shower and redo my bandages, but first things first... I opened the window and lit the last of Dudley's smokes.

It had been long days since my last cigarette, and the craving for wizarding cigars was nearly as strong as my desire for Fleur. Well, no, no it wasn't. But I needed a drag on something, being the messed up angst-ridden hesitant idiot that I was.

To avoid any chance of being recognised, I'd sent Fleur to the wizarding district in New York that morning with a shopping list. She'd spent most of the galleons I'd weaselled out of Miguel Blue, and the packages were due to be delivered any minute now. It was all supplies that would be needed for the journey into Atlantis, where the water was poison and anything edible was more than likely to eat you right back...

A beautiful place. Dangerous, yes, but not without its charm. I finished the last of my cigarette and headed into the shower.

Voldemort rested heavily on my mind as I stood before the mirror in the bathroom, hair still dripping from the shower, and began to swab my stitches with some of the alcohol-based disinfectant in the room's first-aid kit.

It would not be too long before he and I would come face to face – had I learned enough this time to make a difference and kill the son of a bitch? Not entirely, not with his horcruxes still out there... I knew where they all were, and as soon as I'd wrested Atlantis from his control I'd be going hunting, but for now I just had to stay alive...

And stay one step ahead of all my enemies, old and new. I suppose I could add the French Ministry to that list, if my innocence in the

assassination of their leader couldn't be proven. I was doing myself no favours by running all over the world. Oh well.

"Whatever will be, will be..." I mumbled, wrapping fresh bandages around my chest.

I couldn't shake the feeling that everything was spiralling out of my control. But then what else was new.

The packages Fleur had ordered arrived at the hotel shortly before three, and it took four baggage handlers to haul it all up the elevator to my room. I tipped them all a thousand dollars each in American Muggle notes because I'd no longer need the stacks of cash after the next week was up. And I would have spent most of it by then.

Most of the parcels were of magical origins, yet they were harmless enough. There was a crate of enchanted rope, a dozen or so trunks with a touch of spatial expansion on the inside, as well as dragon's fire crystals for light and heat, spell bound compasses and navigational aids, alongside six or seven sturdy broomsticks and a smaller trunk filled with vital potions. It was a start.

Fleur joined me in packing most of it away into two of the expanded trunks. She had changed into a pair of jeans and a simple turtleneck jumper. Simple clothes and yet on her they were stunning, especially the figure-hugging jeans.

"We will need dragon's fire in Atlantis, 'Arry?" Fleur asked, as we carefully placed the volatile crystals in a trunk, making sure they were secured with extra padding.

"Possibly, to keep away the cold," I said. "Weather's a little different where we're going."

"Really?"

I winked. "Oh you'll see." That was everything packed into a stack of manageable trunks. "Ready to go? Portkey in five minutes."

“Oui, I will just fetch my bag.”

She dashed out of the room and I did a bit of quick spell work to stick the trunks together in four stacks of three. Everything was packed and ready to go. I had my briefcase, my Atlantean trinkets and Ring of Concealment, as well as the contents of the mini-bar all securely in place. That just left the portkeys.

The trunks I could shrink down to a quarter of their size, until they resembled small chests. I firmly attached to the top of each trunk stack one of the five portkeys I'd spent the better part of an hour constructing. The various objects – including a bar of soap, a toothbrush, an ashtray, and a bible – shook and thrummed with power.

They were clever portkeys, and thus required a little extra kick of strength. They were designed to circumvent the border security wards both around America as we left, and in Italy as we arrived. The backlash would alert anyone within fifty miles once we arrived in Italy, but we were travelling to a relatively remote part of old Latium, and arriving unhindered was more important than keeping the noise down.

“You have everything?” I asked Fleur upon her return. In my hand was a fifth portkey, for the pair of us, a wire hanger.

“Oui, yes. Ready when you are, ‘Arry.”

“Okay. Trunks, check. Briefcase, check. Fleur, check. All good to go.”

I whipped out my wand and muttered four quick incantations. The stacks of trunks disappeared with a wisp of magic, jerked out of existence and sent hurtling between two magically bound points in space across the face of the earth, as Fleur and I were about to be.

“Grab on,” I said, offering her half the coat hanger.

“Where iz zis going to leave us?” she asked, slinging her bag over one shoulder and grasping the hanger with her elegant fingers.

“One step closer to the future,” I replied. “God save us from that. One step closer to that charming hero you’ve spent the last few days looking for.”

Fleur tsked. “He better be ‘andsome, at least, for all zis trouble he iz putting me through.”

“No one can be heroic as well as pretty,” I grumbled. “But now and again I can be pretty heroic. Ha...ha.”

Fleur rolled her eyes. “Let’s go, ‘Arry.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I muttered the activation charm and that old familiar tug behind my navel sent Fleur and I hurtling across the planet pretty damn close to light speed, through a tunnel of roaring wind and flashing colour.

Leaves crunched underfoot as we landed amongst the expedition equipment I’d sent ahead a moment ago. Sunlight shone in through the branches of trees all around, filtering into playful beams that danced across a trickling stream nearby. A breeze carrying the warmth of the day’s end wafted into the silent clearing.

I sucked in a deep breath of clear, fresh air – it tasted of the forest, of an ancient strength. “Latium...” I whispered, feeling the tension in my joints and bones leak out of me. Even my headache seemed to ease at a glimpse of the most important magical centre in the modern world.

“Zis iz... quite beautiful, ‘Arry,” Fleur said. She looked stunning in the fading sunlight, at the end of the day, as pure and as innocent as the forest itself. I was nearly overcome with desire.

“Yes, yes it is, sweetheart,” I replied. “I’m glad you’re—”

There was a pop close by, and then, before I could blink, “Stupefy!”

I ducked on pure instinct as a beam of crimson light rocketed over my head and struck Fleur on the shoulder, sending her spinning into the thick carpet of leaves underfoot. She fell softly, calmly, her eyes fluttering closed as if she were simply going to sleep.

My wand was in my hand and my body was reacting before my mind could catch up. I spun on the spot, kicking up a plume of dirt and crackling leaves, zeroing in on our surprise attacker.

Standing on a shallow bed of rocks in the stream about twenty feet away was a woman with a pair of electric-blue eyes and a wave of purple hair, falling in gentle curls to her shoulders. A woman I knew well – knew intimately.

“Harry,” she said. “Merlin, Harry, it is you!”

“Tonks,” I said, almost dropping my wand in surprise. “Um... hi there.”

~~*~*

A/N: OMFG!!1! it's Tonks! Well, at least it's not as bad as the cliffhanger on the last chappie. Let me know what you think, folks. I've already made a start on the next chapter. Everything's going to change for poor Harry.

Thanks for reading,

Joe

Chapter 16 – Till Memory Now, I Can't Recall

Part Seven – The Gunslinger

You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em,
Know when to walk away and know when to run.
You never count your money, when you're sittin' at the table.
There'll be time enough for countin', when the dealin's done...

~~Kenny Rogers

"Tonks," I said, almost dropping my wand in surprise. "Um... hi there."

"Harry," she hissed, her glare and her wand directed right at my eyes. "It is you! Merlin, what in the world have you been up to? Do you know how many people are after your head?"

I grinned and began to laugh. "It's damn good to see you," I said, lowering my wand and kneeling down in front of Fleur, amongst the dry leaves. She had fallen okay, and was just simply stunned. I brushed her tussled hair back out of her face with care. "Little trigger-happy with the stunning spells, aren't you?"

"Well, I was aiming for you," Tonks said. "You just lit up the countryside for miles around with those portkeys!"

"That how you found me?" I asked with a nod. "Of course it is. You followed the note I gave you back on Privet Drive, didn't you?" A little early, but then everything was changing. "You're a little early..."

"This..." Tonks said, reaching into a pocket of her robes, her wand still trained between my eyes. She had slowly covered the distance between us, standing now only six feet away. "You really wanted me to find you?" She threw a scrunched up piece of parchment at me.

"'Potete trovarli con Janus antico, sotto i eaves di Latium perso'," I read aloud from the note. "You can find me with Janus old, under the

eaves of Latium lost... Heh, it's been a long week since I wrote that..."

"Aye, it has," Tonks said. "Anything you want to tell me, Harry? Anything you want to own up to? Murdering a French President, perhaps? Kidnapping Fleur Delacour? Dumbledore has the whole damn Order scouring Britain, France and the U.S. for you!"

I met Tonks' eyes and tried to reassure her with my own, to ease her confusion. Her wand didn't budge an inch. "It really is good to see you." I sighed. "Okay, let's have it out then, are you here as an Auror for the Ministry or as a member of the Order?"

Tonks pursed her lips and her eyes flared from blue to green. "Depends," she finally said. "Did you kill Thomas Laurent?"

"No."

"Did you kidnap Fleur Delacour?"

"No."

"Did you set a Death Eater on fire in Diagon Alley?"

"No—wait, yes, yes, I did. Heh, forgotten about that."

Tonks took a few tentative steps closer, kneeling down close until her wand almost touched the bridge of my nose. I did nothing to stop her, nothing to cause her alarm. The wind whistled breathlessly through the trees, the sun slowly setting beyond distant, invisible hills.

"What's happened to you, Harry?"

Down to my right, Fleur was fresh rainfall and strawberries amongst the crunchy leaves... up to my left, Nymphadora Tonks was green apples and white roses below the trees – two conflicting scents of two very different women. It made me shudder, in a good way, where they clashed.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” I said, and the hell of it was that I was telling the truth. Death Eaters, danger, demons – even if they were new demons – were all part of my trade. Yes, sir, damn it all.

Tonks slowly lowered her wand from my face, and I did let out a slow breath I hadn’t realised I was holding. She kept lowering her wand away from me and towards Fleur. “Ennervate!”

Fleur sat up fast with a gasp, her hand darting towards her wand and her hair flying wild about her shoulders, tussled with crushed dead leaves. “Wh—?”

I placed a firm hand on her wand arm, calmly keeping the peace. “Fleur, it’s okay, you were stunned. It was an accident.”

“’ Arry... merde, who stunned—?” Her eyes fell on Tonks and Fleur regained some of her icy composure, rising to her feet and somehow making the crushed leaves sticking to her clothes into an accessory. “Bonjour...”

“Hi,” Tonks said. “I take it you’re with Harry of your own free will, Fleur? He hasn’t kidnapped you?”

I glanced at Tonks sideways. “Don’t trust me, huh?”

Fleur waved the accusations away. “Ridiculous. Of course I choose to be here with ‘Arry.”

“I only ask because someone should’ve talked some sense into him by now.” Tonks stepped in front of Fleur, kind of pushing me out of the conversation entirely. “You must know what he’s being accused of.”

“Oui, yes, I do, and I also know he did not do it. He ‘as been with me ze whole time.”

That felt nice. Score one for the good feelings.

Tonks didn't seem to like that. "You're of age, Fleur, you should be responsible enough to know he needs to be brought in. Running makes him look guilty!"

Fleur's temper flared. "Oh, youtheenk you know best, Mademoiselle Tonks, hmm? Of zis matter, you know very, very leetle." Her accent was coming through thick and strong.

"Ladies, please," I grinned, "there's enough of me to go around." Twin icy glares made me shut my mouth. "I'll just... go check on the trunks."

The trunks were fine.

Fleur and Tonks bickered away in the background, arguing back and forth over where I should be and what I should be doing. I sat down on one of the loose chests and took a few deep breaths. I had to admire Fleur for saying nothing of Atlantis, or of Chronos and what we've been up to. And I had to admire Tonks for trusting me more than she really should. If I was her, I'd have made sure the stunner didn't miss a second time.

Some time passed, as relative as ever, and I watched the sun sink below the trees, relishing the cool breeze that kissed away the sweat on my forehead. It seemed to soothe the otherwise furious pain just beneath, burrowing into my skull. I had a flash of memory, of burning this forest to the ground many years ago – lifetimes ago – to flush out a pack of Death Eaters. Everything to fire, in the end, and then to dust.

"Harry, what on earth are you doing?"

Tonks. She had snuck up on me, lost in thought. I sensed Fleur standing not too far away, both of them spent in their somewhat useless argument.

I linked my hands behind my neck and gazed up at the sky through the trees. The sun was fading fast, giving way to azure twilight and

the first stars of the evening. "Fleur and I are going to capture some starlight tonight, Tonks. You're welcome to come along if—"

"Oh I'm not letting you out of my sight, Harry Potter."

"Well..." I turned and met her eyes. "Lucky me."

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And then we were three...

~~*~*

"So what's your plan, Harry?" Tonks asked. "Keep running? Was it not enough to have You Know Who after you, you had to get the French riled up, too? That's not to mention the noise the Italians will make if they find you entered Italy via illegal portkey. Merlin, you're in so much trouble!"

I chuckled. "The goblins are pissed at me, too, aren't they, Fleur. I got time demons, Shambling Bone-Men, Tweedledum and Tweedledee out to cut my head off, and I'm also double-crossing Miguel Blue on the side. That's a bad guy for every day of the week, really..."

Tonks missed a step through the woods and I put my arm out to steady her. We'd kept our wands dark to avoid unwanted attention. I suppose those portkeys hadn't been too subtle, but time was of the essence, and I was afraid if I used the Time-Turner my brain would explode, so that left few options. I'll have to use it eventually, I suppose...

"Miguel Blue?" Her voice was near-breathless. "The Miguel Blue. Harry, you spend most of the year cooped up in a castle in remote Scotland, how do you even know that name?"

Questions lead to questions, never to final answers, unless the final answer is death. It is for all save me – and Voldemort so long as his horcruxes remained intact. "I know people who know people, Tonks."

Fleur had been silent for most of our trek, sticking close by on my left. She was absently levitating the dozen or so shrunken trunks through the trees. Her presence was overwhelming, to say the least. I felt like she was protecting me, should Tonks try and whisk me away back to England. Now she spoke... "Who is Miguel Blue?"

Tonks threw up her hands. "Keeping secrets, Harry?" she asked sarcastically.

Secrets? Just a few, darlin', just a few. "He's pretty much lord of all crime in the Northern Hemisphere," I said to Fleur. "In both the Magical and Muggle worlds."

"Oh." Fleur seemed to take that in her stride, bless her. The shock that came with being around me was wearing off on her.

Tonks was still absurdly out of her depth, believing well and truly that I'd either lost my mind or that I'd put sanity on hold for the time being. She'd come round. "Where exactly are we going?" she asked, trying to peer ahead through the darkness and the settled mist curling through the trees.

"Glad you asked," I said. I'd been preparing for this. "We're currently in the Latium Preapennines, several miles up and to the right of the Tiber River which flows on down to the west coast of Italy. We're on the border of two groups of volcanic mountains – the Cimini and Sabatini – heading towards the crater of the Sabatini, which is home to the lake, Bracciano." I paused to breathe. "There's a Muggle town on that lake, and a medieval castle, but it's the many empty villas along the lake we're interested in. They'll be our home for the next week as I prepare."

Tonks was shaking her head. "Prepare for what?" she asked, clearly dreading the answer.

I glanced at Fleur and we shared a smile, a smile that spoke of the last few days and the hardships that had sealed our friendship, despite the many omissions I'd had to make about the truth and

depth of my knowledge and power. A smile that spoke of truths to be shared.

“Why, for Atlantis,” she said to Tonks.

And it was good to have her fall silent for a few minutes as we ascended through the thinning trees, the night still young and the days ahead drastically becoming too few...

Before long we escaped the forest, three silent figures moving through a silent night, atop a ridge that descended into darkness spotted with the bright lights of the Muggle town. Lake Bracciano was a dark expanse of flat water, reflecting the millions of stars overhead with near-perfect clarity. This place made the world seem big, huge, when really it was very, very small, and ultimately doomed.

“Not this time,” I whispered. “This time is my time.” If either of my two companions heard me they said nothing.

We descended from the ridge into the volcanic crater – the three of us and four silent stacks of supplies trailing in our wake.

Tonks could be silent no longer. “Why did you give me that note, Harry?” she asked. “Why did you want me to find you?”

“Oui, why, ‘Arry?” Fleur asked. I think Fleur preferred it when it was just us.

Did I? No... I cared for them both. My memories were split with years spent with either woman, with both women. I cared for them both.

“I wanted you along for the ride,” I said, keeping a firm footing on the grassy embankment. “And I’m hoping you’ll help me take down a few Death Eaters, and stop Voldemort from gaining more power.”

That brought her up short. “What do you mean? You can’t honestly be serious about Atlantis – it’s a myth, Harry, a fairytale.”

Here we go again... Fleur had come to trust me on this, and I knew in a day or two Tonks would as well, but it rankled having to start from the beginning again and again.

“Alright,” I said. “But I’ll prove it to you before the week’s out – if you stick around, that is.” She would. “And if you don’t bring Dumbledore and the Order down on us for the next few days...”

“I’m sorely tempted, Harry,” she said, and in the darkness I watched her hair shimmer from brazened purple to bubblegum pink, and back again – a sign that she was frustrated, angry. “It’s too dangerous right now for you to be on your own like this...”

“You only found me because I told you where I was going to be,” I pointed out. “And I can fend for myself, for the most part. Only been stabbed once this week... and burnt a few times. Anyways, don’t you feel that marvellous sense of adventure in the air? The game is afoot, you know.”

Tonks came to stand next to me, close enough to rest a hand on my shoulder. “You sound all kinds of crazy, Harry.”

“Oui, I agree,” Fleur said. Her beauty was softly glowing in the pale moonlight from on high. She was grinning. “But he iz ze right kind of crazy, Mademoiselle Tonks.”

“Why are you, of all people, going along with this?” Tonks asked, spinning to face Fleur. She was shorter than the French witch, but both women could stare down a freight train as if they were a hundred feet high.

Ooh... strong women, they gave me the shivers.

“Because I believe, as ‘Arry does, zat what we are doing will aid in ze war against the Dark Lord. I was attacked earlier zis week, in your Diagon Alley, ‘Arry saved me. I owe him some measure of trust for zat alone, and for ze many other things he ‘as done for me zis week.”

I very nearly blushed at that. Fleur was making me out to be some sort of hero.

“Give me until tomorrow lunch time,” I said to Tonks, running a hand back through my hair. “I’ll show you both something that will prove my whole ‘Voldemort is seeking the power of Atlantis’ nonsense. Something pretty cool, actually.” I grinned. “But no messaging Dumbledore before then – agreed?”

Tonks hesitated – torn between loyalty to the Order, to the Ministry, and wanting to stop me from taking off and leaving her behind. She couldn’t know I wouldn’t do that, but if push came to shove I would have to avoid Dumbledore and all the rest. I simply couldn’t juggle goblins, and Aurors, hit-wizards and assassins, not to mention my new demon stalkers, and still stop Voldemort from making his fucking stupid play on the Old World.

Damn it all.

“You have to promise me,” Tonks said. “That you won’t go running off, Harry Potter. You’re in enough trouble as it is. I don’t want to face Dumbledore if I lose you again on my watch. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” I said, tilting my head to regard both Tonks and Fleur, standing side by side, in the darkness. “Definitely agreed.”

“Right then,” Tonks said. “Now where’s this villa we’re following you blindly to? Can we Apparate from here? I’ll side-along you if you point me in the right direction.”

“Oui, eet iz getting late, ‘Arry, and you promised me starlight tonight.”

“That I did. It’s not far now, we’re nearly to the edge of the lake. Five minutes.” I’d done this before – usually on my own – and I knew which villas would be empty, which were the most isolated. It felt like cheating, somehow, having all this foreknowledge. I suppose it was cheating... I wonder how long before Fleur or Tonks, mostly Fleur,

called me on all my bullshit. “Not long now...” I said. “Oh, and I can Apparate, Tonks, surprise! But thanks for the offer...”

Tonks just scoffed, and I may have caught her smiling in the faint light of the moon. No doubt she was wondering just what other laws I’d broken in the past week. Honestly, I couldn’t remember half the shit I’d done.

My head hurt too much to think too hard, and all my godforsaken, ill-gotten, memories had yet to sort themselves into anything resembling an ordered linear fashion. I knew what time it was, I always knew that, but the days all seemed to be rolling into one... the fights and the struggles.

I was tired. Tired of the fire and the dust.

At least Tonks was here now. Nymphadora Tonks. One memory that didn’t burn away was that of having sex with her in the ruins of Hogwarts... I wanted that again. Without the ruins, and with Fleur, as well.

I wanted a lot of things.

I wanted Voldemort dead and dead for good.

I wanted my headache to stop, for the pain to go away.

I wanted to rest.

I wanted it all to stop.

There was a time and a place for all that was happening, and for me that time belonged to the past. It was over – I’d lost, the world descended into chaos – and yet here I was, back to the start. The Dream all over again, as lucid as reality, as imaginary as time.

I wanted all my enemies annihilated beyond this word, their bodies broken and their will shattered. I wanted blood, and violence, and vengeful justice. I deserved these things, after all that had been sacrificed. After all that I’d sacrificed.

Well, and damn it all.

I guess even the fire and the dust have their place...

The shore of the lake was strewn with pebbles and fertile volcanic soil. We were still submerged in darkness, three figures darting across the night, yet there were dogs barking in the distance, across the lake in the Muggle town, and lights were on over there and up in the impressive medieval castle, along the fortifications and amongst the many windows.

We passed several villas, yet they were all a little too close for comfort. I remembered one in particular that was empty, along the upcoming bend in the lake, and recalled that there was nothing beyond it save the steady rise out of the crater and into the Cimini Mountains.

Perfect.

The marble bricks of the villa seemed to glow as pale as limestone and chalk in the moonlight, as Tonks and Fleur followed me up a set of worn steps to the heavy wooden door. A simple unlocking charm granted us entry and I stepped in as if I owned the place – which for the next week I did.

I slung my tattered briefcase down by the door and hit the light switch. Nothing happened. Of course the power wasn't on. A fine layer of dust and stale air greeted us on the long hallway, adorned with brass fittings and motionless paintings. No one had been here in a while.

"Right then," I said. With just a thought I lit the end of my wand. The bright light was hard to look at for a few moments after spending the best part of an hour in darkness. "We should get settled in, ladies. That looks like the kitchen down there... we'll have to get some food from the town in the morning." My stomach grumbled. "Some beer and whiskey, too."

“You’re too young for that,” Tonks said, her own wand held before her as she swept into the living room, nearly tripping over the loose corner of a plush rug. “We’ve no right to be here, Harry,” she called over her shoulder. “But since we’ve no better option and you won’t listen to reason, I’ll check the perimeter and lay a few Muggle repelling charm—”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” I said. “Those spells are too easy to recognise. I’ve got something better that’ll do the same job.”

“What?”

“Magical, mystical ancient runes and ward platforms. It’ll take me a few hours, but then, we’ve got a few hours, so sit tight. Help us unpack these dragon’s fire crystals to get some light and heat in here.”

Tonks was leaning against a sofa under a clear tarp in the living room. She was watching me with a scrutiny I found oddly pleasing. “Dragon’s fire, Harry, really?”

“They’re in... Fleur, which trunk are they in?”

“Zis one,” Fleur said, levitating one of the four stacks she had placed just inside the door over into the living room. “Second from ze top.”

“Alright then, you two do that and I’ll start sketching some ward runes.”

I enjoyed making ward runes. Almost as much as I enjoyed using destructive runes, like Az-reth yesterday against Chronos. There’s something satisfying about crafting a glyph of just the right depth and clarity that it takes on a life of its own, fuelled by some unknown tap driven into the source of all magic.

It was relaxing, I suppose, and required so much concentration that I didn’t focus too much on other things, like memories of the harm I’ve done, deaths I’ve died, and of days to come. Those memories left me

feeling too maudlin and reflective – vulnerable. I had to be as hard as steel, as diamond, harder even.

Or else game over.

The smooth sculpted marble the two-storey villa was constructed out of would serve as a perfect conduit for the runes, and I decided (as I have before) to carve them into the house itself, outside. It was easy work, under the heavens, as I had done this many times, in many different places, across many different lives.

I didn't really even have to think about it. My wand tip was burning with that same thin needle of fire I'd used to carve runes yesterday, cutting the stone like butter in swift curves and sharp, cruel lines.

“Na'nife,” I whispered the names of the runes. “For protection against dark intent.”

It was almost too easy.

“Grén'yil.” A rune to repel those without the spark of magic. A much more powerful charm than what Tonks had been planning on.

I made the villa stronger, sturdier, with a reinforcement rune – Dre'am'an – and on the four corners of the property, including the front stretching down to the lake, I drew special runes of shielding – there would need to be a fifth in the centre of the house to create a magical shield similar to Protego, invisible until struck by spellfire.

One hour faded into another and I circled the property several times, twice with Tonks and once with Fleur, coming out to check on me. They watched silently as I melted runes into the marble and stone. None of them were glowing, but in the pale light they did shine as brightly as tarnished silver. Once I activated the lot of them they would glow, fading from electric blue to bruised purple. I'd tried to place them in inconspicuous places for just that reason.

“And... Ul'renon'ix,” I said with some satisfaction, placing the last exterior rune – designed to, as a last resort, detonate and wipe out

the villa in a cloud of hellish green and black fire. I couldn't recall ever having to activate the self-destruct, but better safe than sorry, as they say. Heh.

Back in the house I placed the single interior rune at the top of the stairs and watched as a dome shield, shining faintly blue, extended outwards around the property down to the edge of the lake. It lit up the night for only a few seconds, and then became invisible – a single barrier of protection.

Activating all the runes around the property was a simple enough procedure. The runes were linked to my wand, to my magic, and I uttered their names one by one, as if casting a spell, and one by one I felt the protections come online. Each one drained me of a little energy, until I was washed with fatigue and wanting to go to bed.

That was one of the drawbacks of using old runes like these – they took the caster's strength, and sometimes even blood.

We were safe as could be, except there was still one job to do this night. And at least this time it should be a little safer, a little easier to do, seeing as how I was sober.

Fleur and Tonks were in the front room, speaking quietly in the warm light emanating from a dragon's fire crystal, shaped like an icicle with a flat base and dull point. They'd removed the cover from one of the sofas, but all the other furniture and the Muggle appliances remained untouched.

"All done," I said. "Not quite as warded up as Hogwarts, but good enough."

"Yeah we felt them, Harry," Tonks said as Fleur nodded. "I can only guess at what half of them do. Anything we should watch out for?"

"Yeah on the back of the house," I waved in the general direction, "near the water heater is a rune glowing green and black. Green and black, okay, don't touch it."

Tonks nodded. "Why?"

"You'll explode us all," I said. "Now, hows about we catch some starlight so we can get off to bed, hmm?" I glanced around the room. There was a fancy china cabinet on one of the walls, and within I could see three or four glass flower vases – that'd do. "Grab one of these each," I said, charming the lock on the cabinet open and taking two of the four. "And follow me..."

Outside it was getting on for midnight, the moon was high in the sky and surrounded by a trillion million stars, bursts of galactic cloud clearly visible in the background of the dark curtain overhead. There were no clouds, nothing to impede the travel of the distant lights... A perfect night for what we had to do.

The low wall of marble-limestone at the top of the stairs and before the door was where I placed my two vases. Fleur and Tonks did the same and with a quick "Aquamenti!" I filled each vase about a quarter full with clear water, to catch the light and keep it fluid and cool – so I didn't explode us all.

A lot of the stuff in my life had the potential to explode.

"Okay, this'll take about half an hour," I said. "Sil-othrinum!" A bead of super-heated blue light formed that useful cutting needle at my wand tip.

"What will?"

"Few more runes," I said. "These vases need to be reinforced and turned into vessels to catch the starlight." I worked as I talked, carving tiny runes from my memory. I worked faster than I had the other night, when my mind had been in a hazy mess of Fleur in a black dress and several double shots of bourbon.

"You actually mean starlight?" Tonks asked.

“Oui, he does,” Fleur said. She had alighted softly onto the edge of the wall, dangling her legs over the edge, and staring out at the dark lake. “Atlantis is here, isn’t eet, ‘Arry?” she whispered.

I almost slipped carving a rune that would’ve melted a hole nearly a mile deep through solid rock if I had. “What makes you say that?” I asked, keeping my voice steady.

“Zis place feels old,” Fleur replied. “Very old.”

“Aye,” I said. “We’re under the eaves of Latium lost... Magic was born in these hills. The first wands and staffs were crafted here, the first spells were written here, cast here... I’ve always thought it feels nice,” I finished softly. “Like coming home.”

“You’ve been here before?” Tonks asked, leaning against the wall on my right, a single eyebrow raised. “Here I was thinking you’d never been out of the U.K.”

“I get around.” The vessels were nearly there. I had purposely left the last rune off each vase in order to make sure they started collecting all at once. It would be more impressive that way. “There’s a lot you guys don’t know about me. Heh.”

“Zat I do not doubt,” Fleur said dryly.

The runes had cooled and now appeared as if they were crystallised within the thickness of the glass vases. I added the last glyph, a small activation and regulation lesser rune, and the glass became unnaturally clear – crystal clear.

“There we go. This is an old process, too, one that no one else can do but me.” It started slowly, small sparks of light appearing in the water at the bottom of each vase. “I could make a killing marketing this stuff... unfortunately it’s pretty unstable.”

“What’s that sound?” Tonks asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“That’s the stars,” I said. “The stars singing.” It was like the chiming of a bell, almost below hearing, like pipes or soft piano keys stolen on the wind. Pure silver light burst to life in tiny, tiny sparks in the water, dancing and swirling.

“You do not disappoint, ‘Arry,” Fleur said, and linked her hand in mine with a soft smile. “I can see ze misty trail up to the sky.”

A wisp of white smoke, silvery-white, drifted down from on high and flowed into the vases, brining with it those tiny silver dots of energy. Sparks that brightened and dimmed on the whim of passing time.

Holding Fleur’s hand my pulse rate jumped, but I remained calm, enjoying her presence and her closeness. I returned her smile with weary eyes, wanting to tell her so much, both her and Tonks, about the years I’d lived and the time we’d spent together. There were no words for that.

It was mostly a horror story anyway...

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On the whim of passing time.

As do we all.

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I awoke without there being any fuss during the night, demonic or otherwise. The ward platform lay undisturbed, and the dusty villa was silent as spears of the day’s first light cut in through the windows. I yawned and rolled over on the sofa, wanting a painkiller for my headache and three or four days more rest...

But there was no rest for the wicked, as the saying goes.

Turns out the fancy Italian villa only had two beds. Might’ve been my subconscious hoping for the best when I’d chosen this place. We’d called it a night just after one, the starlight vases doing their work,

and discovered the old mahogany bed frames upstairs. A bit of magic had cleaned them right up, fluffed the pillows – at least Fleur had given me one of those for the night.

She'd taken the master bedroom, with the queen-sized bed. I'd innocently suggested that there was more than enough room for two in there, to which I'd received an enigmatic smile, a kiss on the cheek, and a brief 'Goodnight, 'Arry,' before the door was closed in my face.

Tonks had wanted to stay up on watch, to make sure I didn't abscond into the night, but in the end tiredness won out. She had been searching for me for nearly three days, with little rest. That was partly my fault, I suppose, disappearing on her watch at Privet Drive. Okay, entirely my fault.

No matter.

The morning air was brisk and a touch chilly outside. The four vases of starlight were full to the three-quarter mark, glowing ever so faintly. At night they would blaze as bright as, well, as the stars. I had several litres of the stuff now, but it mightn' t be enough. More to make tonight then.

I melted and fused the vases shut, firing the glass and containing the magical ingredient. I made sure to cast a few extra reinforcement charms on the damn things. If one of the vases cracked at night, with enough force to shatter, it'd blow a sizeable chunk out of the crater we were in, a fireball as hot as the sun would sweep through the town across the way, and probably boil all the water in the lake.

"Good morning, Harry."

"Hey, Tonks," I said, carrying the vases inside one by one and placing them into one of the empty trunks. I added a few cushioning charms just to be on the safe side. "Cool hair."

"Thanks," she said, stifling a yawn. Dressed in a shirt and jeans, no Auror robes this morning – I took that as a good sign – Tonks stepped lightly down the stairs, being careful not to trip over the

mounds of trunks at their base. Her hair was short and spiky, electric green and getting longer. "Yours is all scruffy lookin'. What's for breakfast?"

"I've prepared French toast and fluffy pancakes with traditional maple syrup and a platter of fresh fruit."

"Really?"

"No."

"You always this funny?"

I took a bow, sensing the sarcasm. "I try to keep my witty banter fresh for when I cross wands with Voldemort. He's got his whole 'evil cloud of disbelief' at my arrogance going on and is all like 'Potter, how dare you defy me!' and I'll respond with something snappy like 'Didn't have anything better to do, Tommy-boy' and that'll enrage him so much that he'll reveal his evil plan and I can save the day.'

Tonks snorted laughter. "How can you be so blasé about that? He really does want you dead. The most powerful dark wizard ever and he's after you... it scares me just thinking about it."

I shrugged. "You'd be surprised what you can get used to..."

"Is that really why you're doing all of this? Whatever all of this is?" Tonks asked. "You're fighting him, fighting... Voldemort?"

"Yes," I said. "Simply yes. If for no other reason than he's taken far too much from me. Call it justice, personal vengeance... my parents, Cedric Diggory, and Sirius just to name a few. Forget all this crap you read about me being some supposed 'Chosen One', if actively fighting makes me some sort of prophesised hero, then so be it, more power to me – it still doesn't change the fact that I'm going to cut off Voldemort's fucking head." I paused. "Sometimes... some people... well, they just need killing."

Tonks' hair had faded at the mention of Sirius to a simple brunette ponytail, and her eyes were oddly normal looking. She was still beautiful as normal, but I hated seeing her sad.

"You've grown up a lot since the Department of Mysteries," she said, tucking a loose strand of hair back behind her ear. "I miss him, too, you know."

I nodded. In my mind, despite all the fiery years, Sirius Black still remained the closest thing I'd ever had to a father. His death had been so unfair... and the only justice it could see would have to be of my own making. "Of course I know. Stick around, Tonks, and you may get a shot at Bellatrix Lestrange for what she did."

Tonks sighed and let a moment pass. "Well, it's too early in the day for talk like this, and you still have to show me why I shouldn't drag you back by your ear to Dumbledore and have this whole mess sorted out."

"Heh, by lunch time, I promise." My stomach grumbled. We'd skipped dinner last night, and there was a town full of fine Italian breakfast just across the lake. I was thinking pizza bread with a whole lot of garlic, and a flagon of apple juice. "Do you want to come and get breakfast with me?"

Tonks shrugged. "I prefer a shower first thing, but the water isn't working upstairs, I was going to go see if I could switch it on, actually."

"Fine, anything in particular you want bringing back?" I picked up my briefcase and shrugged on my suit jacket from a supply trunk. I had a fair amount of Italian currency in the briefcase – always planning ahead, from Day One.

"Food – lots of it – and maple syrup, you liar." Tonks hesitated. "I can trust you're coming back, can't I?"

I chuckled. "Here, you can hang onto this for me." I unbuttoned my collar and slipped the Time-Turner from around my neck, tossing it over to Tonks. "You know what that is?"

"Merlin, Harry, this is a restricted device—"

"Yeah, you know what that is. I'll be back for it in half an hour, forty minutes tops, okay. No time-travelling while I'm gone, only I can do that." I laughed on my way out the door, thinking that a fine joke.

I was funny, damn it.

The town across the lake, Bracciano, was just waking up as I Apparated to its outer limits and strolled in amongst the narrow roads and cobblestone streets. There was little traffic, as there were no roads in or out of the town – it was serviced by a single railway line that descended off down the Tiber all the way to Rome, about an hour away.

The markets along the high street were already set up and doing a brisk trade, even at this early hour, and I perused the fresh food and cold meats, the dew-soaked fruits and the vegetables so fat and healthy that they looked strange. Food grew simply better in the fertile soil of Latium, helped along by more than a little magic flowing in the veins of the land here.

I didn't bother bartering the prices, as I had cash to burn in this last week amongst the world of the living. In nine days, if all went to plan, then I'd be forcing a gate through to the realm that held Atlantis... there'd be no need for money there, none at all.

The Muggle townsfolk were helpful and friendly, suffering my English-tainted Italian with good humour and identifying me as a tourist, which I suppose I kind of was. I wasn't worried about being recognised, as that had never happened before, but I still kept my head down, smiling at the pretty girls as I filled a produce box with fresh food.

I spent about half an hour in that friendly atmosphere, soaking up the good vibes, and even managed to pick up a bottle of aspirin for the

pain I was in, and a pack of fine Italian cigars – I had to flash some fake ID, my passport – for later.

With a box full of food for both breakfast and lunch slung over my shoulder, I ducked down a side alley and Apparated back across the lake to just outside of the ward platform around the villa. I hadn't had the time or the energy to program the wards to recognise any particular magical signature – I would after breakfast – and didn't want the damn things to unleash my own fury against me.

Inside, Fleur and Tonks were busy in the kitchen, dusting down bench tops and clearing protective covers off the appliances.

"Good morning," I said to Fleur.

The two of them had towel-dried hair and smelt fresh out of the shower. Soapy and clean. I had a brief image of Fleur and Tonks sharing a shower, a thought that made me very happy. Very, very happy. I wanted to stay with that thought, see where it went, somewhere nice and warm, I'd say—

"Bonjour, 'Arry," Fleur replied. "How are you today?"

My head was killing me, my stitches were itching like mad, and I was still pretty damn tired. "All good – just got breakfast here." I sat the produce box down on the green marble counter. "See you got the water working."

"Yep," Tonks said. "Just flicked the switch to 'on' and stood back. I didn't want to turn on the power, in case it interfered with your ward setup."

"Good thinking," I said. "The power's not connected anyway. No one's been here in awhile."

Tonks nodded, her eyes curious. She wanted to know how I knew that. "There's a coffee plunger here, please tell me you—"

I tossed a bag of roasted beans across the bench. "Here you go. There's fresh milk, too." God help me if I'd forgotten the coffee.

"Maple syrup?"

"Of course." Never one to disappoint, that's me. "We're gonna have to put this food on ice to keep it healthy. One of the trunks will do."

A steady silence descended over the kitchen. I sensed unspoken questions, unspoken concerns. The dust dancing in the early sunlight distracted me—

"' Arry, I need to talk to you," Fleur said at the same moment as Tonks said, "We need to talk, Harry."

I nodded, expecting as much. "After breakfast." I offered them both a smile that was supposed to be reassuring. "Few things that can't wait till after breakfast. Now, somehow we have to jerry-rig that stove to light without electricity, otherwise the maple syrup is all for naught..."

Breakfast took the best part of an hour that morning. Yet it was an hour I had to spare, so to speak. Right now the quest to Atlantis was waiting for certain pieces to fall into place. Jason Arnair had to fly-in from the United States, the gateway had to be prepared, and supplies gathered... Plenty of time that would all come down to the last minute, as it always did. I was praying for no demonic interference, but that felt like too much to hope for.

After breakfast I showered and slipped on one of my clean fancy suits. I like to cut an impressive figure, mixed with a healthy application of blessed madness, as it kept my enemies guessing. I looked rough in the bathroom mirror, bags under my eyes and my scruffy hair hanging somewhat lank and lacklustre. No matter.

I wasn't here to look pretty.

Fleur caught me heading down the carpeted stairs back towards the kitchen. She had been waiting for me, to talk, to beat Tonks to the punch, no doubt.

“You look older in those suits,” she said. “You can make me smile. Don’t you ever change, ‘Arry.”

“Too stubborn for change,” I replied. I stood a few stairs above her, looking down at the top of her platinum-blond hair and into those perfect discerning eyes. I took a seat on the stairs and patted the space next to me, inviting Fleur to do the same. “What did you want to talk about?”

The French witch took a seat and took a deep breath. “I want to go to Rome at some point today. Eet iz just down the river, non? I need to owl my family, my father, and let them know I ‘ave not been kidnapped by a crazed assassin.” It was said in jest, but her tone belied the worry she felt.

“Sure,” I said. No problem there. I’d been expecting as much, actually. In the past, the other pasts I’d lived, there had been none of this president-assassination crap, but Fleur had absconded with me more than once. Better her family not worry, although with the escalated circumstances this time an owl may only serve to agitate them further... “We can go together tonight, if that’s okay. You’re more than welcome to go now, even, but I’d rather be with you in case... well, just in case.”

Fleur thought about that. “Chronos,” she said, and surprisingly took my hand once more, there on the stairs, placing it between both of hers. “His promise to kill me.”

“There’s something we have to do here today, for Tonks, so she doesn’t feel obliged to run to Albus Dumbledore. That’ll create more problems than I can deal with.” My hand felt good between Fleur’s. It felt soft, reassuring I think both to myself and to her. “People will die if that happens, they just will. So is it okay if we hold off on Rome until this evening?”

“Of course. Whatever you think iz best, ‘Arry, as more so everyday I ‘ave to trust zat you know what you are doing.”

I laughed. "I do know what I'm doing. We have to go to Rome, anyway, for supplies and such, might as well do as much as we can in one trip. Have you ever been to the Via Magicka?" I knew she had, years ago.

"Oui. Some years ago now." She squeezed my hand. "That will be perfect. Thank you, 'Arry."

"No, no... thank you, Fleur," I said, and meant it completely with what little soul I had. "This whole mess wouldn't be half as much fun if I didn't have you along with me."

She giggled. "What girl could say no to a real 'Arry Potter adventure, hmm?"

"Oh, be careful what you wish for..." I laughed softly. Because lots of people are going to die.

We remained seated on the stairs like that for a few more minutes, chatting idly about mostly nothing and neither Fleur or myself making any move to release our linked hands. That close contact... it felt like friendship, a friendship hastily bonded near-unbreakable by the trials of the last week, but there was a spark of something more. Of course there was.

There always had been, time after time after time... after time.

It was 09:57 and thirty-eight seconds.

"Can I have a word, Harry?" Tonks said, appearing at the foot of the stairs. "In the living room?"

Fleur let go of my hand and tucked a strand of her hair back behind her ear with a soft, even sad, smile. "Off you go, hero."

I took the stairs two at a time and dodged the trunks at the bottom, heading into the front room. The dragon's fire crystals stood lifeless on the coffee table from the previous evening, and I joined Tonks on the uncovered sofa, knowing full well what conversation was coming.

“You want to go to Dumbledore,” I said, before she could say a word. I didn’t say it with any heat or any real inflection at all.

Tonks blinked, her eyes flowing from brown to blue. “You’ve put me in a difficult position, Harry,” she said.

I had a flash of memory, of that moment at the end of the world, in the ruins of Hogwarts. Pulling my mind out of the gutter, I said, “Yes, I know.”

“Despite whatever you want to show me today – proof of Atlantis or otherwise – you really shouldn’t be running around like this, not with everything that’s happened, is happening.” Tonks took a breath. “We have no idea where You Know Who is—”

“Voldemort,” I said. “Say Voldemort. And he’s already reached Atlantis, that’s why Death Eater activity has been pretty much nada these last two weeks.”

“What? How do you even know that?” Tonks didn’t believe me.

I tapped my infamous scar. “He and I are connected, would you believe. I see his mind... he sees mine.” Well, not exactly true – not yet. That was to come, and it would hurt like all hell.

Tonks paled. “Are you serious? Does Dumbledore know? That can’t be good magic, Harry.”

“No it’s not – it’s what happens when you get hit with a Killing Curse and bitch-slapped with a horcrux all at once, mixed in with some touchy-feely crap about a mother’s sacrifice.” I’d lost her on that, of course I had. “Dumbledore could explain it better. Long story short Voldemort and I sometimes end up sharing a mind.”

“That’s... that’s awful.” She shuddered, her hair changing to an involuntary shade of spiky snow-white. “How do you know he’s not putting thoughts in your head? Like this nonsense about Atlantis – a bedtime story, Harry.”

“He’s not doing that.” Yet.

“But—”

“I won’t let him do that, Tonks. It works both ways, and I’m more aware of the connection than he is.”

The metamorphmagus next to me pursed her lips in thought. I tilted my head and thought about kissing her, about the days to come and the choices to be made. What did I have to lose? A whole lot, all things considered.

“I still really think we should go to Dumbledore, Harry, and I mean today – right now.”

I waved that away. “Dumbledore is not infallible,” I said. “In fact he’s dying, Tonks, he won’t see out the school year.” I felt a pang at that, of regret. For all I could do, the leagues I could travel through time and the worlds I could unlock... there was no cure for that dark curse caught in the old man’s frail hand. “Score one for fucking Voldemort.”

My words, of course, threw Tonks further off balance. Which was what I was trying to do – to keep her confused enough about what choice to make that she’d give me time to show her that the secret world exists, that the gateway to Atlantis rested not far from the front door of this house.

“What’s a-a horcrux?” she asked, somewhat faintly. “You said that—”

“Yeah... It’s a piece of a torn soul, created through an act of murder and dark ritual. It’s a way of cheating death, Tonks, and I can’t say more than that until you’re on my side.” I crossed my arms and met her eyes. “I want you to come with me, to Atlantis, like I said last night.”

“Why do you want that?” she asked, trying very hard to absorb and understand everything I was throwing at her.

“A skilled Auror watching my back?” I said. “Why wouldn’t I want that?”

“So you want me to abandon both the Ministry and the Order to go on some impossible quest for the lost city of Atlantis?” She laughed. “Do you know how insane that sounds?”

“Beautifully so,” I agreed. “And yeah, that’s basically what I want, but try and think of it as keeping an eye on me for the Order – that’s part of the job, isn’t it?”

“Oh you’re not getting out of my sight, Harry, Time-Turner or no Time-Turner.” From within the pocket of her jeans Tonks retrieved and returned to me the sparkling silvery hourglass.

I slipped the chain back over my head and under my shirt. “Thanks.” It felt good to have the device back, even though using it was surely killing me. I didn’t feel complete without the damn thing. Time-travel could be addicting, as addicting as booze and cigarettes.

“You’re asking a lot of me, Harry.”

“I know.” I nodded. “And I know you kind of just received the really abridged version of events, most of it probably not making much sense. If, after what I have to show you today, you decide to come with me, I promise we’ll sit down – you, me, and Fleur – and I’ll explain everything as best I can.”

Tonks nodded. “What’s Fleur Delacour got to do with all of this, by the way?”

I shrugged. She had everything to do with this, to do with me, as do you, Tonks. “Death Eaters tried to kill her in Diagon Alley, and there’s... another man, who wants to kill her, as well. I intend to stop that from happening. Violently.” Chronos could be hurt, he could bleed, therefore he could die. “Also, she wants to see Atlantis, too. If you can’t trust me at the moment then you can trust her, okay.”

“We’ll see about trust after lunch,” Tonks said. “That’s your deadline, Harry Potter.”

I grinned. “That’s okay, I’m good at working to a timeframe.”

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You don’t fuck around with the infinite.

I can’t remember who told me that.

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A little before eleven that morning, I led Fleur and Tonks down to the edge of the lake, picking up a few pebbles off the grassy shoreline, and skimming them across the calm, gently lapping surface.

“So we have to go for a swim,” I said. “Right down to the bottom of the lake and into a secret cave.”

“Are you serious?” Tonks asked. “Merlin, you are serious.”

“Afraid so.”

“Zis seems very familiar,” Fleur said with a small smile. “Iz zere a dragon to fight also, ‘Arry?”

“Nope. Not yet.” I placed my wand against my temple and cast the Bubble-Head charm, enclosing my head within a bubble of breathable air. ‘No kidding, we’re going in the lake.”

Fleur hesitated only a moment before performing the same charm. Tonks didn’t make a move. “How are you doing magic without getting called up on it, Harry?” she asked.

I held up my index finger, the shiny golden band of the Atlantean ring, the Ring of Concealment, caught the sun. “Magic ring that I got off the goblins – it’s from Atlantis, you know.”

“Of course it is.” Tonks sighed and then shrugged, casting her own Bubble-Head charm. “This better not be some poor joke.”

“Don’t worry, it’s not.”

I shrugged out of my suit jacket, wand in hand, and waded into the shallows. The water was cool but not cold – and it was clean, very clean and fresh. That was Latium. Back on the shore both Tonks and Fleur were removing their shoes and unnecessary clothing.

“Keep the shoes,” I said. “It’ll be rocky where we’re going.”

I think, after all the years, there must be something in my voice that lets those that want to believe me, to believe in me, trust me just far enough to do as I ask. This whole situation must have seemed insane to Tonks, and even still to Fleur, who was taking a lot on faith, and yet they joined me in the shallows regardless...

Ready to swim down into dark, unknown depths, chasing a fairytale.

This swimming adventure would be necessary only once to access the Gates of Atlantis. I had memories of struggling and dying trying to find this entrance under the lake, here in the volcanic crater of the Sebanti Mountains, in ancient Latium. The man who had left the map to Atlantis all those millennia ago... Janus himself... he’d hidden the clues well, too well.

I’d died more than once following them.

But no more. Atlantis was mine, this time was mine. I’d not be thwarted again.

“Okay,” I said. “You’ll have to follow me down and stay close. If we get separated just head for the surface. We’ll be swimming down about eighty feet, and heading into an underwater cavern. It’ll be dark, so wands at the ready with a little bit of light.”

“How do you know about this, Harry?” Tonks asked.

“This is straight out of a manuscript that Dumbledore helped me retrieve in Rome a few days ago.” Well, kind of, I’d ditched him at the heart of the Magnus Fontis and portkeyed on over into Mt. Everest. “There’s a cavern down here that leads back under the crater and up into that peak behind us. In there we should find a cathedral-like hall, filled with sparkling waterfalls and deep drops into a dark abyss... oh, and a monolithic structure of magical origin that’s the oldest man-made object on the planet.”

Tonks held my gaze. “You really believe this, don’t you?”

Fleur giggled. “Oui, he does, and I would not bet against him, Mademoiselle Tonks.”

Fleur’s support felt warm and fuzzy.

“Follow me.”

I dived into the deep end, wand clutched tight before me, completely submerged and heading down into the inky depths. I trusted my memories to guide me, even as I called forth light from my wand to help show the way.

I hadn’t been lying when I said I knew the way from the knowledge contained in the Voynich Manuscript. It was, and had only ever been, the one document that contained the information that Janus, the last Atlantean to survive the end of the Old World, had left for those that followed. I needed Jason Arnair, his amazing mind, to translate the rest, even though I’ve read it before, as it changes.

I can’t really explain it better than that. The manuscript, written near on ten millennia ago, changes. The only constant is this underwater entrance to the Gates... after that, it’s up to time. And since time is never set, since there is no such thing as certain, the manuscript – linked inexorably to Atlantis, which was where Time was born – is in a state of constant flux.

It doesn’t make much sense to me. I only knew to follow my nose and hope for the best.

Memory served without much concern down to the bottom of the lake, and I forced myself through the water with care, swimming through and over crags in the break of the lakebed. I kept a lookout over my shoulder for Tonks and Fleur, the two beams of light from their wands reassuring in the otherwise dark and wet world.

The cavern had been made to look like a natural rock formation, and unless you knew what you were looking for you'd never see it against the rocky and reedy lake floor. Yet there was one tell, and as I swam down even deeper into a wide crevasse, tiny glittering runes – powerless, dead – yet unfaded were carved into the rock.

A dark and ominous tract opened up before me, crusted with centuries of silt and sand, about as inviting as the maw of some long forgotten oceanic beast.

Fleur and Tonks joined me at the entrance to the cavern, their faces slightly askew through the Bubble-Head charms. Yet I could see what they were thinking, and yes, I was serious.

I fired a few cutting hexes and severing charms to clear away the chaff and lake weeds that were blocking the way. A school of startled fish darted past us, probably somewhat blinded by our wand light.

“In we go,” I said, heard by no one but myself. I swam into the true darkness in one of the lost, forgotten, deep places of the world. I didn't even hesitate.

As I've said more than once, I knew Fleur and Tonks would follow me, because they always do. Despite the protests, despite the often times where what I suggest seems so ridiculous, they follow me. It tears at my heart and preys on my mind, the power I can wield...

I can inspire such terrible loyalty.

And I was afraid – not for myself – but for the damage I could do, the harm I could cause.

I was afraid.

Yet I didn't hesitate to swim into that dark and narrow cave, that unknown abyss on the bottom of some foreign lake, working only on scattered and broken memories of the men before me who had tried and failed, who had burned in the fires at the end of all things good.

Perhaps they were right, when I saw it on their faces, perhaps I was insane. But then... I had some fucking right to be. Doing what I do, my 'job', I reckon crazy's how I stay alive long enough to take down as many of the power-hungry bastards as I can.

So what was I really afraid of? Did it even matter?

No, no it didn't. All that mattered was the war. Oh well.

Either way, Fleur had held my hand today.

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A/N: There we go - Tonks is introduced, Harry is planning something big, and the next two chapters will see preparations completed and, I'm thinkin', a kickass battle between all the opposing forces in this story. You know, all the ones opposing Harry. So it'll be Harry vs. everyone. I know who I'd put my money on. Thanks for reading, folks, please review.

Chapter 17 – Just Saving the World

Part Eight – The Joker

You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em,
Know when to walk away and know when to run.
You never count your money, when you're sittin' at the table.
There'll be time enough for countin', when the dealin's done...

~~Kenny Rogers

There are moments in this life that are set to break you.

Moments that will break you.

And you will face these moments, when you have to, knowing full well that only the broken are guilty enough to understand the true responsibility that comes with any power.

All power consumes.

All power consumes, I thought, swimming through a dark and narrow tunnel that could be leading down all the way to Hell itself. Always a sobering thought, given the nature of my quest and the ultimate outcome... what was at risk, and what I had lost more than once.

Light from my wand shone and flowed across the jagged walls. They were man-made, littered with dead runes of the Old World, and crusted with millennia of silt and dark growth. Every few feet I chanced a look over my shoulder to make sure there were two further spots of light following me through the darkness.

Fleur and Tonks.

We had been swimming now along this tunnel for the best part of fifteen minutes, moving slowly but surely towards what I had promised was a cave of wonder and ancient splendour. The water

was faintly green, and the pain in my side from that damn stab wound was flaring up under the strain of the swim.

As the tunnel narrowed further it also began to head upwards. There was a noticeable incline in the dark corridor even as the walls closed in on all sides and the slick, slimy river weed ran creepily across my back. Just when it seemed the passageway would narrow into a dead end, I broke through the darkness and surface of the water, arriving in a flickering world of dark, damp rock.

I hauled myself out of the slim pool, dripping wet in my suit pants and collared shirt, and stepped onto relatively dry land. The roof was low and the path ahead dark, but there was a path – just as I remembered, steadily rising off into the distance.

Fleur and then Tonks breached the surface behind me and I turned to help them out of the water, offering an arm each. Once we were all out of the muck and mire I cancelled my Bubble-Head charm and took a deep breath of the cool, stale air.

"Zat was very... uncomfortable," Fleur said, banishing strings of algae that were clinging to her blouse. "'Arry, so far I am not impressed."

"Nor I," Tonks said, drying her clothes with a touch of magic.

I kept my wand alight as the girls cleaned themselves off, keeping one eye on the tunnel ahead for any unsuspected demonic surprises, and one eye on the way Fleur's and Tonks' wet clothes were hugging their frames. One could get lost in those curves, given enough time – yet time was in short supply 'round these parts.

"We're standing in a corridor built some ten thousand years ago by a man who may have been the strongest wizard ever, what's not to be impressed with?"

"Ze damp," Fleur said.

"The dark," Tonks added.

"Ze foul smell."

"The slime."

I noted their concerns with half a grin. "Company's good though, right?" I chuckled. "Let's see where this leads..."

We set off single file up the rocky path, taking it slow so as not to stumble. Fleur muttered a few charms from behind and I felt my clothes and hair drying out. This was the third such secret deep place I had been in this week, yet I couldn't help the knot of anticipation tightening in my stomach. There was magic ahead, and lost treasure, and here I was alive to seek it.

There was also danger, and perhaps a touch of destiny. I hate destiny with a passion rivalled only by accepting this fate of mine. Calling all of this destiny, my fight and this damn war I kept desperately trying to win, was weak. Destiny sounded fantastic, allowed for the impossible, but it also allowed for the acceptance of failure and an immovable fate.

And that was not acceptable.

Because this time things had to change. Destiny, my defeat, had to be thwarted, and I had to make it happen now.

"Janus was a figure in Greek and Roman mythology," I said into the darkness, my voice echoing back to me along the long tunnel. We were still rising, heading up through the tunnel and into the heart of the mountains bordering the lake and volcanic crater of Sebanti. "The myth says that he was a god, an ancient deity and the keeper of gates and doorways. He ruled all beginnings and all endings."

"Oui," Fleur said, her voice low to minimise the echo. "I've heard this before. The month of January is named for Janus."

Tonks put two and two together. "Are you saying that mythical Janus and the Janus you say built this underground passage are one and the same?"

I nodded. "All myth is grounded in reality, Tonks. All myth. As far as I can figure it out, Janus was the only wizard to survive the cataclysm that befell Atlantis roughly ten millennia ago. I don't know what happened," that was true, I didn't, "but he spent the rest of his life devising a way to keep the power that had destroyed the most advanced nation the world has ever seen from being used again." I took a breath. "He hid Atlantis, what remained of it..."

"How do you hide a city?" Tonks asked.

"It takes Time," I said. "A lot of time and very little Time..."

"What does zat mean?"

"You'll see..." I couldn't explain it without giving too much away about my own dabbles in Time magic. "It was never meant to be found again, the Lost City," I continued. The corridor was widening, the ground becoming smoother and more of a floor. "But Janus knew that magic had no limits, not really, and he assumed someone would – purposely or inadvertently – find a way back."

"Lord Voldemort," Fleur muttered, as Tonks said, "You mean..."

"Oh yeah," I said with a sigh. "You got it. So, knowing it was inevitable, Janus devised his own way back to Atlantis, and left a map in the form of a bound manuscript for anyone that would dare follow it."

"Is that what you're doing?" Tonks asked. "Following an old treasure map?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm following an old treasure map."

"That's—"

"What? Crazy?" I asked abruptly, but my frustration turned quickly to idle sadness. "Of course it is, Tonks, everything about this is crazy, but crazy doesn't mean it's not true."

A silence fell between us. There were runes again on the walls here, and as before they were lifeless, nothing but silvery scars carved long, long ago.

"How did Voldemort find a way then?" Tonks asked.

"By tearing his soul into enough scattered pieces that he was half in and half out of this world anyway," I said bitterly, not really caring if it made little sense to Tonks and Fleur. I always lost my cool when thinking of this, of what had been done to achieve such terrible ends. "Horcruxes, vessels of the damned, killing yourself a little so you can live forever. Voldemort breached the shadows of the Old World and pretty much built himself a bridge between this time, and Atlantis Time."

"Atlantis... time?" Fleur asked.

"You'll see..." I repeated, and if my voice sounded ominous and dark then so be it. "In about a week, you'll see everything." Except my truth.

"So you're saying that's where Voldemort is now?" Tonks pressed the explanation, she always did. I admired her tenacity as much as her curves. "In another world? Another time, even, if I understand what you mean?"

"Yes and no," I said, actually pretty impressed. Her guess was fairly close to the truth as close as I could explain it. "I don't know how to put it... but he's not in another time, he's in Atlantis Time – and that's folded back on itself thanks to Janus."

"Folded back?"

"I am confused," Fleur said.

"Me, too," I laughed. "I've managed to piece this together from glimpses into Voldemort's head and pictures in a ten-thousand year old manuscript." That was how I originally did it, back in the day, but by then it had been too late – Atlantis had risen from the depths of the

Old World, and along came the fire and dust to settle the destiny of the New.

"Is You Know Who there alone, Harry?" Tonks asked after a long moment.

I paused and turned to look at her, both her and Fleur in the pale wandlight casting our shadows across the rune-capped walls. "Are you saying you believe me?" I asked with a grin. "Do I have you convinced, Tonks?"

Tonks shrugged. "You have me doubting myself, Harry Potter."

I nodded. "Wait till you see what's up ahead then. If I'm right," and I was, I'd done this before, "then we're about to see something quite spectacular."

I turned and continued on along the passageway, moving quickly now as it was fast approaching lunchtime. "Oh," I called over my shoulder, "there are Death Eaters at Atlantis, too. The inner circle, for the most part. Voldemort took them with him when he crossed over."

Fleur tsked and sighed at that.

"Great," Tonks said. "Didn't want to get all the way to Atlantis and have nothing to do. Just great."

We were laughing at the darkness, all in our own way. It always, always came down to either laughing or screaming. Sometimes both at the same time. And those words are straight from the mind of someone who has done this all before, and is only just starting to get it right.

Remind me, if you will, exactly what we're fighting for...

The corridor was now fully worked stone, carved out of solid rock in the heart of the mountain. On either side there was a small gutter

flowing with fresh clear water, water flowing upwards toward whatever lay ahead.

It was Tonks and her sharp Auror eyes that noticed it first.

"That water's flowing the wrong way," she remarked.

"So it is," I agreed. "We're nearly there."

Water served as a conduit in places like this, places close to the space between our world and Atlantis. Water also served as protection against letting creatures of the Old World out of places like this. There was a ring of solid enchanted water circling this entire mountain; a sliver of protection should the Bone-Men break through Janus' Gates of Atlantis.

"Zere's something else, also..." Fleur tilted her head. "I can feel wards, I theenk."

"Right as well, Fleur. Anti-Apparation wards for the most part. Janus didn't want your average witch or wizard just coming or going here."

All of a sudden the corridor came to an abrupt end in front of a conical shaped wall. There was no way forward, not even for the water, which disappeared down dark drains spiralling away from the two gutters. There was a small groove cut into the wall, an empty basin carved out of the rock itself.

"A dead end," Fleur said, mildly disappointed. "Surely not, 'Arry."

"Not to worry," I said, and reached into my pocket. From within I removed a melted clear bottle etched with runes and filled with a softly glowing light.

Starlight. One of the two beer bottles I'd filled with the magical ingredient a night ago in New York City. I'd picked it up before leaving the villa just over an hour ago now...

"What's that for?" Tonks asked.

"Lighting the way, Tonks. This is for lighting the way."

It was a delicate procedure opening the bottle. It had been fused shut and reinforced with several runes and spells in order to ensure it wouldn't crack and rupture, blasting apart everything in a hundred-metre radius. I broke a few of the runes, vanished the containment spells, and placed the very fragile bottle in the basin set against the wall barring our path.

"Okay... get ready to run if I screw this up," I said. "Not that it'll matter..." That was funny enough to warrant a small chuckle. "Sil-othrinum!" Carefully, ever so carefully, I melted a hole in the roof of the glass bottle, minding the heat, and then turned the bottle on its side to pour the contents out into the basin.

The starlight flowed from the vessel, eating the unprotected outside of the glass and destroying the very thing that had kept it contained. It flowed into the basin, and I counted one, two, three...

"Four, five, six, sev—"

The passageway blazed with light. All at the same time, every rune on the walls, those dead silver gouges that had faded almost to nothing, came alive and began to flow and move across the stone surfaces. Electric-blue and fierce bruised-purple, emerald-green and crimson-red, the runes moved swiftly and surely, absorbing the energy offered by the starlight.

"Ta-da," I said, loving Tonks' amazed expression and Fleur's gentle laugh of enjoyment. "Impressed yet?"

"Oui," Fleur said. "But you better not 'ave brought us down here for just a light show."

"Of course not," I said, feigning mock-outrage. "You can extinguish your wands now. There's enough power in that little bottle of starlight to keep these runes glowing for a decade."

"What are they doing?" Tonks asked.

"Moving this wall," I said, nodding towards the starlight basin. "Be prepared for spectacular, ladies. Right... about... now!" I raised my arm in anticipation of the main event, but the wall barring the path remained firmly in place. "Damn. Timing's off... keep waiting for it..."

"This is starting to feel pretty anticlimactic, Har—"

A tremendous gust of wind roared through the solid wall before us and sent us back a few irresistible steps. The wind drowned out Tonks' voice, drowned out all noise save the pure raw howling... the dead-end began to fade away, as runes of all colours, shapes, and sizes poured into the stonework.

Yes! Here was Old World magic at its finest, still fresh and alive after ten-thousand years lying dormant.

The wall faded, the runes flooded into the darkness that lay beyond, and no longer were we trapped in a narrow corridor of cold dead rock and crafted stone. The whole world shook as the runes spread into the cavernous, cathedral-like hall beyond the tunnel. We stood at the foot of a space so large that the entire mountain must have been hollow... but that was just perception.

The howling wind faded to a dull roar that echoed back and forth across the vaulted arched ceiling high over head. The walls and the roof of this central chamber within the mountain were overrun with runes fading and brightening, fading and brightening... running across tiled mosaics depicting lost ancient towers, depicting a silver city in the prime of its life, and mighty ships navigating both the seas and the skies above...

Atlantis.

Hundreds of feet of rock and stone had been smoothed and tiled to replicate a glimpse of a once-proud city, now lost to the ravages and wastelands of time. All across the massive mosaic flowed runes of sheer power, showing more and more of the city as the light spread... There was a garden of roses, white roses, amongst the walls of a castle that shone as bright as steel above the rest of the city.

It hit me every time. Good god... This was a city I had to breach, that I had to wrestle from Voldemort's control. I felt the need to fall to my knees, to beg for forgiveness and redemption, but I remained standing, ever defiant and ever stupid.

There was a lot more to see.

From where we stood the path meandered across a wide chasm on either side. Darkness remained within this abyss, yet it was eclipsed by the raw majesty of the cavern. The path led to a wide plateau in the centre of the space. The plateau was covered in what looked like old chests and what I knew to be several tonnes of gold coin and bullion.

But beyond that, rising dead centre and stretching towards the arched ceiling high above, were two spears of jet-black stone. No runes flowed across the surface of these twin spires. They rose high, at least two hundred feet into empty space, and then curved across each other to create a massive, monumental archway.

But not an archway... I thought. A doorway. Beyond yonder way lay the terrible Gates of Atlantis, just waiting for the right push.

"What is this place, Harry?" Tonks managed, as the roaring wind settled into distant echoes...

"This..." I said, savouring the moment. "This, ladies, is the only real proof that the secret world exists."

"Zis... zis iz amazing, 'Arry!" Fleur exclaimed. "I believed you, you know zat, but zis is proof, non?" She laughed, clear and pure. Caught in her excitement, her accent was coming through thick and strong. "Atlantis 'as to be real! Just look..."

We did look, all three of us, marvelling at the city on the walls, and at the plateau in the near-distance that would take us there all too soon. I wasn't wrong to feel a moment of panic and perhaps even fear. It was well deserved, now that I had confirmed even to myself that the fiery memories tearing through my mind were true.

Fleur laughed again, delighted. She then spun to face me, put her hands gently on my shoulders, and placed her soft red lips against mine.

Fleur kissed me.

I tasted strawberries, I was sure of it, before she pulled back half an inch and whispered, "Thank you, 'Arry," her breath warm on my face. "Thank you... for everything."

I blinked, smiled, tried for words but found none, and then leaned in to kiss her again, driven purely by shock and desire. Fleur didn't shy away. I caught her lips once more and made it count this time.

A moment passed... another...

"Ahem..." Tonks cleared her throat. "When you two are quite done."

We broke away and I couldn't help but grin. "Done? Oh I'm just getting started," I whispered, low enough so only Fleur could hear me.

She tilted her head, trying to hide a smile and a petite giggle, before we separated, turning to look back out at the marvellous cavern, hand in hand.

I let out a shuddering breath as carelessly as I could. Whoa... well, I did not see that happening. I could still feel her beautiful lips on mine, the heat and the pressure. I was flustered, breathing heavily, and blind to all thought save the memory of the moment.

That had been a long, long week in coming.

And everything had changed yet again...

If all power consumes, then this should be an easy game to play. I'm as guilty as the rest, more than most – guilty as sin.

But it's not easy. It's hard and getting harder. So...

Is that a glimmer of redemption I see surfing the twilit horizon?

The pathway across the gaping chasms on either side was wide enough for comfort, and we walked three abreast towards the Gates of Atlantis. Running water could be heard in the impossible darkness far below, and even up above, as if the seas painted across the monumental cavern were rising and falling on the whim of some imaginary tide.

"Don't touch a thing when we reach that plateau," I said. "Really, don't touch anything. A lot of it's cursed to maim and kill."

"Merlin, why?" Tonks asked.

"Some final test crap or something." I shrugged. "About resisting temptation and greed. We must be, heh, pure of heart."

"There's a lot of gold, Harry."

"Aye." I kicked a pebble and sent it skipping over the side of the abyss. We wouldn't hear it hit the bottom. "And it's about to fall for a really long time."

Fleur squeezed my hand. "Really? Over ze side?"

"Every last shiny piece, I'm afraid. Don't worry, there'll be plenty more treasure before we're done."

We were approaching the end of something now. In a week, give or take a few days, we would breach these massive gates and behold something long forgotten and reduced to the fabled halls of fairytale, alongside the Deathly Hallows and the Chamber of Secrets.

It would change the world.

Yet the majority of my mind was thinking on those two brief kisses with Fleur. Stolen kisses, caught up in the moment, yet there had been a spark – of course there had been a spark. She still held my hand now, our fingers entwined... I wanted more of this.

Did I deserve more, considering what was at stake and the lies I had told to get this far?

Maybe yes... and maybe no.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," I said, before my mind could catch up with me.

"Pardon?" Fleur whispered, keeping her voice low to minimise the resounding echo across the cavern.

"Frowning out loud again," I said. "Wands at the ready, ladies."

We reached the sparkling plateau with the monumental obsidian gates and found ourselves surrounded by glittering piles of ancient gold and raw precious gemstones. Stacks of the stuff six feet high, valuable metal the lot, shimmering in the light of the speeding runes sweeping across the vast walls.

A fortune vast enough to last a lifetime – and then some. The goblins would have seized my fortune by now, made it disappear. I needed a new fortune. This wasn't it.

"Blast it over the sides," I said. "Every damned piece. Reducto!" I got the ball rolling with a blast of spell power and a nearby stack of gold was scattered across the plateau and over the endless abyss beyond.

Fleur and Tonks hesitated only a moment until they were sure I was serious and then began to cast their own spells. It soon began to rain gold galleons and glittering diamonds over the side of the chasm.

As the last pieces fell away there was a rumble and the sound of flat river stones grating against one another, tumbling along the bed of white water rapids. Away to our right, alongside the plateau, a secret pathway became visible...

"What iz zat?" Fleur asked.

I held up my hand, gesturing for her to wait and see... Heavy stones fell into place, floating on nothing but air. A set of massive steps curved up and away from the obsidian gates, several metres wide and clear. Whether they had been invisible before now or were appearing from the nothingness below, I couldn't tell, but their purpose soon became clear.

The massive slabs of stone created a bridge between where we stood, where we had come from below the earth, and into the shining mosaic still glittering on the cavern walls. There was a tremendous crack, like broken steel against castle stone, and an archway formed in the side of the mountain – at the base of the secret pathway.

The Old World stonework cut through the mountain within the newly formed arch, and as we watched blue sky, white clouds, and a breath of warm summer air entered the cavern for the first time in several thousand years.

"That's why we had to banish the gold," I said, glaring up into the bright sunlight of the day. "It was a trigger. That's our way out, and our way back in, through the wards and without having to go for a swim again."

"What would've happened if we'd touched it?" Tonks asked.

I shrugged. "Worst case, this platform beneath our feet would've disappeared and dropped us into a very long freefall. Best case, we'd have died instantly."

"Oh."

"Yeah..." I ran a hand back through my hair. "Come on then, it's lunchtime. This'll bring us out halfway up the mountain above the villa and the lake. We can Apparate once we're outside."

"But 'ow does zis work, 'Arry?" Fleur asked, gesturing towards the looming Gates of Atlantis.

I glanced at the massive charcoal doorway. Even in the direct sunlight from above they still appeared dark and menacing. The light

seemed to go out of its way around the gates. "Works on pizza, beer... and the best of our good intentions," I said, then relented. "Starlight – needs a lot of starlight – and we need Jason Arnair, his clever mind, to decipher the order of things in the Voynich Manuscript."

"And what will happen if it does work?" Tonks asked, falling in to step on my other side.

I looked at her sideways, appraising her from behind my glasses. "That depends... are you going to go run to Dumbledore with this?" I asked. "Or even the Ministry?"

Tonks took a moment to reply, a brief hesitation. Was she going to lie to me? Or was she merely gripped by conflicting loyalties and indecision? I hoped it was the latter. More often than not, it had been the latter... Before.

"I... I'll think about it over lunch," she said.

I shrugged. Best I could hope for, really. I felt more than saw Fleur glare at Tonks overtly on my right. I wanted Tonks with me, needed her with me. Her quick wand and special abilities made for a useful ally. But it was more than that, more than I could remember through the burning headache...

"Everything I do I do to stop Voldemort," I said, speaking as much to myself as to Tonks. "Call me the Chosen One, if you like, there's certainly enough prophecy to say as much there, but prophecy or not, I'm out to stop him, Tonks." I met her eyes as we ascended into daylight and the cool mountain air. "I don't need people trying to stop me from doing that out of misguided worry for my safety. I can't fight a war from behind locked doors and old ward schemes. Just think about it, about what's more important in the long run..."

They can't hurt me – the pain, the torture, the mind-rape – none of it works because I'm wired to take it, time and time... and time... again. I'm built for the pain.

They can't hurt me, so they hurt those I care about.

Trusting to fate, to her good will, to what I felt was the right thing, Fleur and I left Tonks alone in the villa that afternoon and travelled downriver via Apparation into Rome.

I'd promised Fleur that she could owl her family, let them know she was alive and that, more importantly, I had not kidnapped her. The letter would be brief, to the point, and explain that I couldn't have assassinated Thomas Laurent, as I had been cooking salmon in her family kitchen at the time.

No doubt, it would work its way into the hands of the authorities and Dumbledore, and no doubt it would be traced back to Rome, back to the Via Magicka, but I had at least a day before that happened.

Still, the search for me would centre on Italy after this. Tonks had said that Dumbledore knew she was in Italy, that a few other members of the Order were in Italy, too. It had been in Rome, in the Magnus Fontis beneath the city's ancient streets, that I had given the old man the slip. I still regretted that, lying to Dumbledore, but we're all of us bastards in the long run...

"We need to be quick," I told Fleur. We ambled along the streets of Muggle Rome, heading towards the Via Magicka. "And I don't think I'll be coming with you to the Owlery – there's a helluva chance I'll be recognised, even under glamour."

"You are still a wanted fugitive, non?" Fleur smiled, her hand on my shoulder, but there was true worry behind that smile. "What if I am recognised?"

I shrugged. "Apparate away. I doubt we'll run into enemies today, but don't hesitate if something feels off, okay."

"Oui..."

I handed her a small purse of wizarding coin. After buying all the trunks and supplies in New York for Atlantis, only about one hundred

and twenty galleons remained of the two-thousand I had tricked out of Miguel Blue. There was a letter in my pocket for him, as well, that Fleur would send on... pretty lies to stop him making my life difficult for a few more days. I passed her the parchment scroll, too.

"Here you go. Twenty minutes, okay. Any longer and I come in wand-blazing, no doubt to your rescue."

"My hero," Fleur said, rolling her eyes.

The Via Magicka was about a block over, near the river and where I had first met Saturnia as a decrepit old woman, listening to Hey Jude on the radio. I kept an ear out for that tune, now. There was a Muggle café on the corner of this street. Maybe they were licensed and I could get a beer. I had plenty of Muggle currency in my briefcase.

"Okay, I'll wait here, sweetheart. Best of luck." I smiled. "Oh, and if you go past anywhere selling cigars, get me a couple, would you?"

Fleur leaned over, smelling of fresh soap – of strawberries and rainfall – and kissed me on the cheek, close enough to brush the corner of my mouth. "You be safe, 'Arry Potter. No bleeding while I let you out of my sight, okay?"

I watched her disappear around the corner, her cloak caught in the breeze and her legs ending in white boots, footfalls as soft as feathers alighting on the cobblestones... there wasn't much I wouldn't do for Fleur Delacour.

I took a seat at one of the free tables outside the quiet little café overlooking the harbour below and had a browse of the laminated menu, scanning the Italian for a beer list and coming up empty. Shame that. Still, there were a few things that caught my eye, and one of them was staring at me from across the road.

He must think I'm blind, I thought, watching the figure out of the corner of my eye. My hand twitched towards my wand. Or he doesn't care that I can see him.

A cute waitress came over in flat heels, a short skirt and a low cut white blouse. Her hair was red, her eyes were dazzling. A guy could fall in love with the way she tucked a loose strand of auburn hair back behind her ear.

I ordered a bowl of ice cream, for the sugar, and a jug of fresh juice. Then I thought about it, shrugged, and ordered the same again. All the while my unwelcome watcher stood with his hands in his pockets across the road. The scant crowds coming and going towards the harbour moved around him as if he wasn't there.

I suppose, in a way, he wasn't there. Not in any sense of humanity, at least.

I gripped my wand all the tighter, feeling his eyes boring into me like some ravenous termite. At least, I reasoned, if he's here, then Fleur's not in danger.

I gave the situation a moment's thought as I was waiting for my ice cream. If he was going to attack, if he was in one of his moods, he would've already done so... I turned and looked him right in the eye. He smiled back as if he'd been waiting for that, and waved.

I waved back, waved over for him to join me under the late afternoon sun, at this small friendly café with a terrace of cloth and a half dozen or so other customers, lounging in the comfy armchairs before a tiny window garden of white roses. It was a surreal scene, as surreal as diving down to the bottom of a lake and emerging in a cavern of lost wonder.

"Io, Chronos," I said, shielding my eyes against the glare of the sun. His shadow fell across me and I lowered my arm. "What a crazy coincidence, seeing you here."

Chronos grinned. "Is that because I should be dead, Harry James Potter? Burned to nothing at our last encounter, yes, yes?"

"Partly. Speaking of which, you're looking well."

"I feel young again, as they say. May I sit?"

"Please," I said, willing to maintain this charade of niceties. Although Chronos did look good – young and handsome. No older than I, even. His jaw was set, coated in rough stubble, and his eyes were bright beneath his dark hair. "How can I help you today? There are no graveyards to raze to the ground nearby – no pun intended – but if you're looking for a fight we could go off and find one."

Chronos shrugged and chuckled. "Actually, we're in Old Rome, Harry James Potter. There are dead cemented in the very walls of some of the buildings around here..."

"Oh," I looked around at the old, dusty cobblestones. "Yeah, I suppose so."

"I am not here to fight you, though, not today."

"You'd get your ass handed to you again anyways..."

"Perhaps." His eyes sparkled in that damned way Dumbledore's did, but they held no malice... or kindness. They made him seem more than what he was, below the human skin he wore.

"What are you, Chronos?"

"Neither enemy nor friend, man or demon. I'm something new this time."

"That much I know," I said, tapping my forehead.

"Ah, of course, your other lives – other deaths and other crimes. How lonely it must be in there, yes, yes?"

The cute waitress came over with a tray and placed my order on the table with a smile for me, and a better smile for Chronos, who was definitely appealing to the female eye. He looked without age, I suppose, sitting across from me in a suit that was of no particular make or style, resting his chin on his hand. The waitress seemed put out that he didn't even glance at her, but kept his unblinking eyes solely on me. She turned on her heel and walked away.

"I got you ice cream," I said, shoving one of the bowls towards him. There was a fair serving in the bowl, along with little cups of chocolate pieces and sprinkles on the side. A thin wafer and strawberries coated the vanilla scoops.

Chronos blinked and looked down at the table, pulling his eyes from me. "What?"

"It's delicious, you eat it." I shrugged and picked up my spoon. "I was being courteous and unnerving all at the same time."

"I'm afraid I don't understand." He picked up his own spoon and dug into the frozen cream. After a moment's hesitation, he slipped it into his mouth. "Delicious," he said, savouring the taste. "I've no need to eat, Harry James Potter, but perhaps I should more often, yes, yes?"

I nodded indifference and sat back in my chair, spinning my wand around on my knee. I didn't think Chronos was going to attack, but you didn't get to be my age without a touch of caution.

"It reminds me of something," Chronos said, taking another spoonful. "Yes, of something..." He paused for a moment and then looked back to me. "You did something today, didn't you?"

"What do you mean?" I hoped Fleur didn't come back early. The less contact she had with this man who had sworn her death and knew my secrets the better.

"Don't play dumb. I felt it in my bones, as the saying goes. This part of the world blazed like the sun a few hours ago. I almost feared you'd breached Atlantis early and I'd missed it."

I scoffed. "Believe me, when I make my way to Atlantis, they'll feel it on the other side of the planet." I wondered how much to say, if anything at all. "You already know what I did."

"I think I know," Chronos said, raising his hand. "There's always a world of difference between thinking and knowing, isn't there? Like, I think you broke through Janus' defences around the Gates of Atlantis,

but I know you are dying, Harry James Potter, from your exposure to Time every time you're sent back."

Dying... I thought. I'd suspected as much, and the way Chronos confirmed my fears, with a simple detachment, made me believe him. "If I keep going back to Before..."

"Even the device you call a Time-Turner leaves you unconscious after its use, does it not?" He laughed. "There's a lot I know, isn't there?"

"What does that mean?" I asked. He had something to tell me, I was sure.

"Time is a loaded gun, Harry James Potter, and we're all of us shooting wildly into the dark."

"What does that mean?"

He stopped eating his ice cream and spent a long minute in silence. Then, "They're coming for you."

"Who is?"

"Everyone." Chronos shrugged. "You've a lot of enemies in this world. I'm telling you they are coming, before the week is out they'll find you up at that lakeside villa you've fortified. The goblins, the wizarding authorities, bounty hunters... Everyone you've pissed off in this last week and then some."

"And how will they find me there?" I asked and then frowned, my hand clenching around my wand. I answered my own question. "Because you're going to tell them."

Chronos nodded. "Forgive me, but yes."

"Why?"

"Same old why, Harry James Potter, because part of me wants to see you fail, part of me wants to see you die, part of me wants to breach

Atlantis with you, the land of dreams and fairytales, no? Ha-ha! But most of all, because I want to see the shit hit the fan. I'm an agent of chaos, after all... of the Red and the Damned."

"Are you?" I asked, wondering what the hell that was. "What are you?"

"What are you, Time Warrior?" Chronos shook his head. "You ask who I am, I ask who you are – we go around in circles, Harry James Potter, like the hands of some infernal clock, no?" He laughed, sprinkling chocolate bits over his ice cream. "Very well, if I must... pay close attention now! Try to imagine, if you can, just for a moment, the vastness of infinity. Can you picture it?"

"All too well," I said, a touch unnerved. The roaring, fiery memories of Before spoke of infinity better than I liked.

"Imagine the universe as a clock, Harry James Potter. As clockwork. Imagine the greatest mechanism ever set into motion, with time always ticking forwards, going simultaneously ahead, towards entropy and the inevitable darkness at the end of light and warmth... aeons away." Chronos savoured another mouthful of ice cream. "Absolutely delightful, yes, yes. Can you see it? Good. Now imagine that this world – and others like it – full of life and, more importantly, magic, as a cog in our universal time piece. Can you see that, too?"

I began to fear where this was going. It must have shown on my face, because Chronos sighed at my expression and looked regretful.

"Yes, yes, you see... you see all too well. You've had lifetimes not to think, but to know. Now imagine, Harry James Potter," and here his voice hardened into something terrible and ancient, something with the weight of time behind it, "imagine that some mortal fool challenges Time and Fate itself and sends that cog back against the flow of all things, against the law of entropy. Can you imagine that? This is what you have done. If the universe is naught but a giant clock, and this world a gear in that clock, then what happens to the flow of all things when a gear starts grinding and skipping a beat every time you die?"

I took a deep breath. "It has to be that way—"

"Why? So you can win one world from the clutches of destruction? Have you not listened? Entropy must prevail, all must turn to dust in its proper time. It is the way of the universe – and you have disturbed that balance, the Hands of Eternity have fallen silent. The Infernal Clock must be repaired!"

"And that's why you want Atlantis, is it?" My temper flared. "Be damned to you, Chronos, you and Saturnia both. Atlantis is mine. Time... is mine." I let out a low, shuddering breath. "I sold my soul to that fucking Clock so I could stop a madman from using a terrible power to destroy this world, my world." My rules, my life, my Fleur, my Tonks, my everything. "You can't come along this late in the game and expect to play on my field, you son of a bitch."

"Spoken like the blind fool you have proven to be, Harry James Potter." Chronos jabbed his spoon into the remainder of his ice cream and glared at the frozen treat. "Today I do not want to kill you, tomorrow I may... but to kill you only sets the gears grinding once more, only worsens the damage." He came to some sort of internal decision. "Kill you, I will, though, again and again until you see reason and concede Atlantis to me. Until you mend the... the Infernal Clock."

I watched a single tear roll down Chronos' cheek and curve into the corner of his mouth. "What are you, really?" I asked.

He chuckled without mirth, without looking up from his melting confection. "Me? I'm the king of ice cream!" He snarled and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

I watched him fade. His entire youthful form, shrouded in his dark and menacing clothes, folded into a point as if he Apparated away. In the time it took to blink – less than that – the seat opposite me was empty.

Chronos was gone.

Gone to tell the world where to find me.

Damn it all.

The system we call society is nothing but a collection of boundaries.

And those boundaries are always, always artificial. Take away the bread and circuses and watch the anarchy fly!

Fleur sent her owl off home without a hitch and we spent the last few hours of sunlight in Muggle Rome purchasing a few boxes of foodstuffs and general household items that would make our stay in the villa a touch more comfortable. I didn't tell her about my run-in with Chronos, but plans would need to be made tonight to fight off any armies that would be heading my way over the next few days.

I expected armies, at the very least.

I had to work on the worse case scenario: that Chronos had already told the goblins and others where to find me. At best, that gave me a day. If he held off for a few days, I may stretch out the week, but the risk of discovery was too great either way. I needed Jason Arnair to get to work on deciphering the ever-changing Voynich Manuscript, but if I pushed him too soon I'd lose him entirely. And then nothing less than murder and making my own horcrux would get me to Atlantis.

Shit.

I was well and truly backed into a corner. Saturnia remained unaccounted for, as well. Waiting in the wings, no doubt, for a moment of weakness on my part. Crazy bitch liked the taste of my blood, after all.

The sun was setting across the peaks of the Sebanti Mountains when Fleur and I returned to the lake north-east of Rome, laden with boxes of supplies. We Apparated just outside of the ward platform surrounding the villa, a ward platform that now felt wholly inadequate in light of the storm I could feel on the horizon.

Chronos had been many things since I'd met him, but so far had not proven himself a liar. I believed he would betray me to my foes, and I believed he'd do it just for shits and giggles.

Tonks wasn't going to be impressed with my list of newly created enemies. She'd want to go to Dumbledore straight away, bring the Order in, but that would get good people killed... Fleur had said there were wanted posters in the Via Magicka with my face on them. The French wanted blood for blood, it seemed. Perhaps I should keep my plans to myself for a day or two, until it was too late to go to Dumbledore.

What would one of the other Harry's burning through my mind do in this situation? My memories were strangely silent on that. I was on my own, as I'd always been before and after the end of the world.

God, but I was tired of this. Beyond tired. It was me against the world – Harry fucking Potter vs. Everyone. I wanted nothing more than those few scant moments with Fleur in the dark, her lips pressed against mine. Was that so much to ask?

Yes and no. Maybe yes. Mostly yes.

There was no way to speed up my crossing into Atlantis, not and remain human, and leave all these pitiful problems and enemies behind. Did I need allies? Should I put them all in danger? Did I dare go to Dumbledore and trust that he'd trust me, after the stunt I'd pulled in the Magnus Fontis?

Night was spreading fast across the sky from the east, and I'd need to set out a few more bottles tonight for some starlight. It was going to take a tonne of the stuff to wrench the rusty old gates open in... five days from now. Yes, five days was manageable, depending on Jason Arnair. I'd have to hurry him along without scaring him off.

I could hold out for five days.

I'd have to.

Even if it meant killing. It was long past time for some killing anyway. And I suppose that was my choice made for me right there. I had plenty of time to kill, so to speak.

Tomorrow I'd fortify this villa and valley, as well as the archway up on the mountainside above me leading to the Gates of Atlantis. Tomorrow I'd turn this place into a war zone waiting to happen.

Let the idiots come and challenge me.

I'd tear them apart like I'd done for the whole wide world time and time...

And Time again.

A/N: 'A kiss is just a kiss...' Oh yeah, Harry got a taste of some action. Did he deserve it? We'll find out in chapters to come. Let me know if you see a problem with this development, folks. I know Fleur and Harry have only been travelling together for a week, but a lot has happened in that week (sixteen chapters worth!) and, on Fleur's end at least, they've been through a lot together. The kiss was pure affection for Harry, and I think at this stage it is justified. It suggests the possibility of more, but it doesn't come at an epic make-or-break moment. It was just a kiss.

As you can most likely see things are going to come to a head in the next chapter or two, in the form of a bloody brawl that will decide who will be going to Atlantis, perhaps reveal Chronos' real motives, and give us our first real glimpse of Voldemort.

How about that Voldemort, eh? Or Chronos? Learnt a little about both in this chappie, too. Gosh, but was it as important as Harry getting some French tongue, so to speak? Heh. I'll get my coat....

-Joe

Chapter 18 – Brink Of Your Vision

Say your prayers and light a fire.

We're gonna start a war...

~Greenday

I looked down at my hand. It was broken, mangled... two of my fingers were missing.

Dazed and weary, I watched the spells and the fire dance back and forth across the vast cavern. Elaborate and inventive beams of magical energy lit the mosaic of Atlantis, casting the walls in alternating shades of destructive chaos and throwing up the mismatched shadows of men, goblins, and worse...

I'd landed with my back against one of the obsidian pillars that marked the entrance to the Lost City. The pillar was shaking – cracking – and white light as pure as silver blazed through the gaps. Soon, now, soon... the way would open.

"'Arry..."

There was so much noise.

So much noise and madness. I shook my head, trying to clear it all away through my relentless headache. My hand didn't hurt, which was something, I suppose. Although it was bleeding like a motherfu—

"Merde, 'Arry, you 'ave to stand!"

Someone gripped me under my arm and hauled me to my feet. Through the dirt and the grime and the smell of hot coppery magic on the air, I caught a wave of strawberries and rainfall. Blond hair, slick and matted with blood on one side from a nasty gash across her forehead, entered my line of sight.

"Fleur..." I croaked, choking on ash. I coughed to clear my throat as my mind fell back in to place. "Where's Tonks?"

"With Arnair and Grace, protecting them from ze worst of eet. 'Arry... your poor hand."

My wand was still gripped firmly in my undamaged right hand. A small mercy that it was my left that had been maimed. No matter. What was a finger or two over the course of a lifetime? Most of the mangled flesh looked cauterised from the blast wave that had sent me ass-over-head into the pillar, but my finger-stumps were still bleeding.

"No matter," I said. From the burning in my side I guessed that my stitches must have burst, too. "No matter. We've got to move. Stay behind me and stay low."

The wide plateau that had been covered with gold and treasure five days ago was now a makeshift battlefield with half a dozen warring factions on either unnecessary side, most of them vying for my head.

A group of armoured goblins wielding fiery swords clashed with a unit of French Aurors.

More Aurors were firing spells against four of the Orc-Mare, the creatures I'd named Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and were being slaughtered. Even though their magic seemed to be operational. Why was it just me they neutered?

At the top of the cavern, Italian forces sent from Rome were battling with the rogue wizards that had come with the goblin bastards.

Far overhead, more of the Orc-Mare circled, flying on their leathery decayed wings and swooping down with murderous intent, vicious swords in hand.

The only factions missing were Dumbledore's Order and the Death Eaters. I didn't expect Death Eaters at this rodeo, but not expecting the worst had bit me hard in the ass more than once. It had ended the world more than once.

And in the middle of it all, broken and bleeding, I stood watching the insanity unfold.

Insanity that had gone on long enough and set this part of the world ablaze – burning through the valley all day to this nexus of forces, to this shit storm of good intentions. It was fucking hilarious that all the people that had come to kill me were killing each other.

Fleur and I ducked behind the glowing pillars and we could feel the presence of the other world straining to break through the barrier that had kept it lost for thousands and thousands of years. It felt like a weight slamming us into the ground, it felt bigger than anything we could imagine – it felt like death, if I'm to be honest.

And I know a little about dying.

BOOM!

Something exploded. Fucked if I knew what, but a rain of shrapnel – stone and tile chips – had us ducking for cover behind the makeshift crates that held the supplies I'd been planning on crossing with into Atlantis. There'd be no time to bring them now, not if the way was opening early and the battle intensified. We were uncomfortably close to the edge of the plateau and the endless chasm that lay beyond.

Tonks was just six-feet away, crouched behind the crates with Jason Arnair and Grace Connor, a grim smile on her face. She had a few cuts and bruises of her own, and paled at the sight of my left hand.

"Hey," I said. "Everyone's trying to kill each other, so I reckon we should just sit this part out—"

A familiar and terrifying screech cut through the cavern and one of the Orc-Mare swooped down low from above, a squirming goblin in armour clutched between its talons. It took a swing at me with its sword, eyes shining with sickly yellow light, but missed. The goblin tumbled from its grip and smacked into the stone near the edge of the plateau, ten feet away.

I thought for a moment. "Fuck this." I wasn't going to sit this part out. All of these bastards were going to die, and die hard. Someone out there owed me one left hand.

The goblin that had fallen from on high was struggling to stand and shaking itself off. All of the goblins had come dressed for war in shiny platinum armour. They looked like mini-knights of medieval England, ready to defend some tiny castle. All of them were equipped with magical swords that burnt with purple fire. Deadly and insane.

I covered the distance between the goblin and the edge of the plateau, just as the little bastard found its feet, and gave him a firm kick in the ass with the heel of my shoe.

I imagine its face looked quite surprised as it went tumbling over the edge into nothingness.

All the while I was muttering under my breath and my wand had begun to vibrate. Black fire, a fire that absorbed light and warmth, began to flow from the tip until I had a length like a bullwhip, thin and crackling.

"Stay well back," I growled at my few allies. Jason and his assistant, Grace, Muggles both, looked frightened beyond all reason, and just merely nodded at me. Fleur and Tonks met my eyes with a look of pure disbelief. Here was another lost magic brought back to life.

"Harry... is that Demon's Light?" Tonks asked.

"Ain't I just full of surprises." My broken hand was really beginning to hurt.

Outlawed by every civilised government – much like Fiendfyre – Demon's Light was a deadly and potent weapon. In many ways, it was worse than Fiendfyre. Fiendfyre could be controlled, at least. Demon's Light was hell unleashed – dark magic at its finest. A single spark would reduce flesh to dust... and dust to nothing.

I never said I was the good guy, not by far, and I'd been pushed too far once again by all these bastards. Chronos would die, before I was through, for bringing this storm upon me. Of that I was certain.

The Demon's Light strained against my wand, fighting to break free. I could feel it getting ready to turn on me if I didn't release it, but my will was greater. Coils of black flame circled my ankles like a snake, slowly rising around my body. If I sneezed it would probably kill me.

Ah, hell, I'd been so sure I'd make it to Atlantis without this massacre. Where was Dumbledore? He should have been here. No matter now. Atlantis was aching at the bonds to be released. I was more than happy to speed that process along.

I walked out from behind the crates and into the centre of the plateau, before the shaking and shining Gates of Atlantis, wreathed in black fire and snarling at those who would dare try and stop me. Flecks of blood on my glasses gave the world around me a shade of red.

I couldn't kid myself here, what I was about to do was murder. It was kill or be killed, it was always kill or be killed. This was something else though. Demon's Light was something else. I was insane, I had to be. But then sanity didn't win wars – killing the greatest number of people did.

So murder it was then. I could never be the kind of hero people expected me to be. I could only be this – bathed in fire and blood.

Begin at the beginning and go on until you come to the end... then stop.

Or if at first you don't succeed, try, try again. That's a cool motto. Want to know a secret though?

You're fucked either way.

Four Days Earlier

I spent the better part of the next day, after returning from Rome and my ice cream with Chronos, fortifying the villa and surrounding valley with all manner of magical defences.

The ward platform was upgraded surrounding the house to include a few nastier spell traps and the low lying lands sloping towards the river were bugged with Apparation blackout spots and magical nullifier runes. I was tempted to use starlight buried under a few trees to set the forest ablaze, but I needed the starlight to punch through into another world...

For that I also needed Jason Arnair. Damn it all.

I'd have to do a little bit of time management on that front. But for now, spell traps and offensive-defensive wards were the way forward.

Goblins, I thought. They'll come dressed to impress with magical weaponry. There could be bounty hunters as well as Aurors from at least three nations. Dumbledore may catch wind of this, too... perhaps I should tell him? Get him on my side now?

I was more than a little concerned that those Tweedledum and Tweedledee bastards would show up and render my magic useless, as they had done in Tivoli and sent me naked down an elevator shaft, so I wanted as much trigger-spells ready as possible should I find myself wandless.

I wanted more than precious Fleur and sweet Tonks on my side should the shit hit the fan. Dumbledore could bring the Order. Dumbledore himself could probably maintain order between the Aurors. The goblins were another matter, as were my time-demon enemies.

Heck, battle strategy left me with a headache.

The long and the short of it was, people were going to die. It would not be Fleur and it would not be Tonks. If anything, I was hoping for a goblin slaughter, but I was realistic enough to know that should the worst happen, and demonic magic-thieving demons descended from on high, then good Aurors – Aurors that would be needed in the war I'd bring back with me from Atlantis – would suffer and die.

I'd done all I could in the valley. As it was, I'd already sent up several flares for those in the know. The magic I'd used was heavy stuff, dark stuff. A scan of the valley would bring a horde of curious Aurors from Rome. I had to assume that was going to happen anyway. I was wanted for high-profile murder, after all. Nations all over Europe were on edge.

Returning to the villa as the sun set in the western sky, and an azure wash of twilight swept into a darkening eastern approach, I could smell something delicious cooking in the wood-fired oven.

I found both Fleur and Tonks in the kitchen, laughing and joking together (for a wonder), and preparing dinner. It was a strangely surreal scene.

"I'm back," I said, sitting down at the table and summoning a can of Coke from the chilled trunk. We'd stocked up on all the essentials in the town that morning. "Who missed me?"

"You were not missed, 'Arry," Fleur assured me. "Well, maybe a leetle..."

I wanted to feel her lips again – soft and sure.

"You're making pizzas?" I asked. "Smells good."

"This is Italy, isn't it?" Tonks said. "Did you lay all your traps and wards?"

I nodded. "Call me paranoid, but someone's out to get me." And I'll sleep easier knowing I can ignite this valley with a click of my fingers.

"Several someones." Fleur smiled at me, it was a touch sad, but not pitying. "You look like you are up to something, 'Arry."

"Do I?" I shrugged and pulled the Time-Turner out from beneath my shirt. "Let's have some pizza, ladies, and then I need to talk about some time management."

We had pizza.

It was good – better than good.

My soda became a beer, the three of us sitting around a marble stone dining table and talking gently into the early evening, with good food. It didn't matter that we were technically squatters in this villa, the setting was nice and so was the company. If I have any memories worth remembering, they're of moments such as this – picture it well, for such a thing is not meant to last.

Not this close to Hell.

After dinner was cleared away Tonks and Fleur looked at me expectantly, and I shrugged out of my suit jacket and undid the top few buttons on my shirt so I could get at the Time-Turner.

"Who's up for some time travel?" I asked.

"After last time?" Fleur said. "I seem to remember it hurting you quite a bit."

"That it did." I shrugged. There was no time for anything else. "I have to jump into the future and pull Jason Arnair back to tonight, so there's time for him to decipher the Voynich manuscript and open the way to Atlantis. We're cutting it close now. I get the feeling its all gonna come down to the last few seconds..."

"Time-turners send you back in time, Harry," Tonks said.

Ah, she didn't know about Saturnia's modifications. I had to wonder if the crazy bitch had known I would need that particular function. Was it possible she had seen the future?

"This is a magic time-turner," I said. "Heh – of course it is."

Fleur stepped around the table and lifted the slack of the long chain over her head. "Why not?" she whispered, and gave my hand a squeeze.

"I don't like this," Tonks said, her hair fading from green to purple and back again. Fading through shades of tempestuous, uncontrolled brilliance.

I rolled my eyes. "Come on, Tonks. I reckon I'm going to need you in about one minute when we land two days from now." Because this is really going to hurt.

Tonks sighed, but stepped around the table as Fleur had done and grasped the silver chain. We had to huddle close, our sides brushing together, to accommodate a third traveller. "And why is that?" she asked, her breath warm on my face.

I winked and laughed. "You'll see." I gritted my teeth and gave the tiny golden hourglass a flick, letting it pick up speed and send us forward in time.

The world dissolved and my headache exploded in a sunburst of dazzling raw pain—

"I want you to understand that there is no coming back from this."

"I understand."

She blinked. "No, I don't think you do. Time ends us all, Harry Potter. You can't expect to wrap it around your little finger without consequence."

"What good is consequence when the world is in ashes?"

"You'll be drawing the attention of powerful forces... beings you cannot begin to fathom."

"Just slit my throat and get on with it, would you?"

My eyes were heavier than stone but I forced them open.

Pale morning light made me shy away into the pillows beneath me, and all my joints cracked at once as I moved. I was in pain – a lot of

pain. For the moment memory eluded me. I remembered pizza, Fleur and Tonks standing close enough to embrace...

I could taste blood in the back of my throat.

It was an effort to sit up, and I realised that beneath the sheets I was only wearing a pair of boxer shorts. There were bloodied bandages crisscrossing my chest. What had happened? My thoughts were slow and muddled. This room was familiar – it was my bedroom in the villa.

"Easy, Harry, we just got the bleeding stopped."

I blinked and saw Tonks next to the bed, the sleeves of her robes pushed up and her hair curving around her jaw in bubblegum-pink locks. She looked gorgeous, sweet, innocent – young but older. No, I was older, years older, because of the time—

"Ah..." I said, and my throat grated against sandpaper. "The Time-Turner nearly killed me, didn't it?"

Fleur was in the room, too, standing by the window. She stared at me in silence, pale and worried but trying to hide it. Brave, that girl.

"You remember what happened?" Tonks asked. "You sent us spinning through time, we heard you screaming, and we land back in the dining room in a heap as you collapse bleeding all over yourself."

I rubbed the bandages. They covered my heart, which was strange. I could feel a faint itch beneath the crimson rags. "Bleeding here?" I asked, tapping my chest. Tapping the scar that had ended my last brief life in Diagon Alley.

"Yes, Merlin knows why?" Tonks said. "And from your eyes and ears. You knew it was going to happen, didn't you? That's why you wanted me to come."

I nodded and swung my legs out from under the covers, a hand pressed to the stitches in my side. It seemed like they were holding for now. Another week without them splitting and I might be in the

clear. "You do have super-special Auror healing training."

"You're a reckless idiot," Fleur said, all of a sudden.

Without my glasses her form was a touch indistinct, but I could feel the worry and the quiet anger emanating from across the room. "How long was I out for?"

"Half an hour or so." Tonks tried to stop me from getting up but I brushed her away. "You lost a lot of blood, Harry."

"I got a feeling the return trip's going to knock a pint or two out of me as well. Heh."

Fleur blew out her breath. "You cannot be serious."

I consulted the ever-present timer in my head. I'd given the Time-Turner enough of a flick to spin us forward at least two days. We'd come forward a touch more than that, to the next morning. Time was short. We had to recover Arnair from Tivoli that morning and return to the past before the attack came.

I'd been betting the villa would still be here when we came forward. Chronos knew I needed at least five days to get to Atlantis. And despite whether or not he was trying to kill me, he wanted Atlantis, as well. Wanted me to open the way. Today was the beginning of the fourth day since he'd sworn to reveal my position to my enemies.

I was cutting it close, and if Arnair wasn't there then I'd need to portkey back to the States and kidnap the bastard. It was going to be difficult enough explaining magic and secret wars to the man without having him turn against me from the start.

"I'm always serious, sweetheart." I offered Fleur half a smile, as I stumbled out of the room. "It's the rest of the world that's taking the piss."

I felt groggy and hung-over. My pounding headache throbbed right through my skull and down the back of my neck, twisting away at my shoulders.

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I was pale and trying to control the spasms in my muscles. The bandages around my chest I peeled away, more curious than anything else. That scar over my heart had followed me through death and - more importantly - time, and now it burst when exposed to the effects of the Time-Turner? There was more going on there than I knew.

The skin was ropy and enflamed, but other than that it looked like any old scar. Only the blood on the bandages served as evidence that it had split open at all. Curious. I lifted my fringe and examined that old familiar lightning bolt. It felt menacing and... eager for me to meet its maker, but there had been no pain or visions in these last days since I awoke in Privet Drive.

Voldemort was in Atlantis - our link wasn't severed, not at all, it was merely quiet. That would change in a few days - four if I had my way - and then this story would really begin. I felt guilty as sin wishing for the war, for the slaughter of thousands, but I was never meant to sit so idly by as I was on Lake Bra—

"Arry, you look terrible."

Fleur. Standing in the doorway.

I shrugged on my shirt and buttoned it up. "You look pretty good... opposites attract and all that nonsense..."

"You will not be much use in being my hero if you fall down dead, oui?"

"Dying was the most useful thing I ever did," I said - not without thinking. I knew what I was saying, Fleur didn't have a clue, but some part of me wanted her to know about the true time travel. A stupid, honest part that didn't want to trick her into loving a monster.

"You confuse me..."

I waved her away. "I confuse myself. Let's get ready - we're going to Tivoli as soon as I've got my shoes on."

Fleur stood there a moment longer, gazing at me with an expression that was two parts unreadable and one part painfully caring. "One day it will all be over, 'Arry."

I laughed, short but kind. "Yes it will. And when it is, we'll go someplace very special - away from the world and almost as beautiful as you are."

Fleur smiled. "You wish to spirit me away?"

"Just you, me and the roses, sweetheart."

"That would be nice," she said, and smiled once more before leaving me alone with my thoughts.

And they were unhappy thoughts - blood and fire and all that rubbish. They were aching thoughts - memories of sex and violence at the end of the world. They were painful thoughts - of enemies closing in on all sides and darkness beyond the edge of the abyss. They were happy thoughts - but were they? Were they really?

That would be nice, Fleur Delacour had said. But no, Fleur. No...

It would never be nice... because it would never be over.

Not for me.

It has to be better than a dream.

Look at where you are, I thought, my gaze drawn across to the twin falls of Tivoli in the early morning light.

Fleur, Tonks and I stood on the far banks of the river, on the far side from the blackened ruins of the hotel I'd been stabbed in and that had

burnt down to the ground around me as I swirled forward through time. It had been in that hotel that I'd last seen Saturnia, the crazy bitch who had stuck me and kissed me in the same breath.

"This is a nice place," Tonks said.

"Oui," Fleur agreed.

"Of all the nice places I've been stabbed and left bleeding to die, this is in my top five." I chuckled.

Fleur winced. "How are your stitches?"

"Stretched but not torn," I admitted. "Not bleeding nearly as much as they were a week ago. Heh."

"That wound isn't natural, Harry," Tonks said. "It's cursed. I tried healing it while you were out after the time travel. What's the deal?" Her hair was fiery red, her eyes cerulean.

"Mild case of demon bitch caused it. Has to heal the old fashioned way."

"Does it hurt? The skin around it seemed enflamed."

"Not infected, Tonks. So let's get going."

Tivoli was an idyllic town. As I've said before, it was ancient – older than Rome by centuries – and the heart of Lazio (Latium that was...). Fishing canals, tumbling waterfalls, broken cobblestones and green peaks in the distance made it a place to grow old.

But it was the hotel we were interested in – the one I didn't burn down –and I made sure my collar was done up, my jacket straight and my shoes were shiny before we entered. I needed to look the part, even though I was burning through these thousand-dollar suits faster than fiendfyre through a field of zombies. I had a few left, in the trunks back in the villa.

I was relying on hope and what I knew of futures past that Jason Arnair would be here today. It was up to fate, and the best of my persuasion the other day to drag him across the face of the earth on nothing but the promise of Atlantean relics. He was going to get a lot more.

The hotel along the twisting streets beyond the harbour was old. Pebbled brickwork and heavy tapestries adorned the front, and inside the air was cool and clear. Hints of modern day technology were shrouded by oil paintings and staff in old tailcoats wheeling brass baggage trolleys. Tonks, with her purple hair, seemed remarkably out of place. I loved that about her.

In the end, I caught a break and Jason Arnair was there.

I found him sipping coffee in the dining room, a newspaper on his knee and a furrow in his brow. In the past, in other lives and other times, nine times out of ten I convinced him to join me. He was drawn to Atlantis, just like I was – call it fate, destiny, call it what you will. Sometimes we walk right into it, other times we stumble and find ourselves fighting for something real.

He wasn't alone. His research assistant, the young woman Grace Connor, was with him, wearing a short little skirt and blouse, all brunette curls and blue eyes. That was unexpected, but a more than welcome occurrence. She was easy on the eyes – and saw me coming before Arnair did.

"Hello," she said, glancing at Tonks and Fleur – her gaze lingered on Fleur, as did most gazes.

"Glad you could join us," I said.

Arnair rose from his chair and offered his hand. I took it. "Your offer was too good to pass up."

"That remains to be seen though, doesn't it?" I grinned.

"Did you bring all the site documentation and sanctioned heritage certificates from the Italian government?"

I kept on grinning. "Allow me to introduce Nymphadora Tonks, and Fleur Delacour. My companions on this little venture, as I hope you will be."

"A pleasure." Arnair took their hands softly, shaking once. "My research assistant, Grace Connor."

"Good to see you both again," I said. "I... regret that we have little time for formalities, but time is slipping so quickly away, and there is a lot to discuss."

"Indeed." Arnair nodded. "Such as site authentication and documentation."

"Don't you just want to see it?" I asked. "We could be there in three days ago..."

Arnair blinked. "I'm taking the word of a boy that there is anything to be seen at all, Harry. Where do you want to take us?"

"Up river," I said. "Into the mountains and the valleys, through time and the heart of all magic."

"Harry," Tonks warned, "remember the statutes of secrecy..."

"I'm a wizard," I said, pulling out the Time-Turner. "This here's my wizardly time machine. Arnair, and Miss. Connor, I'd like you to accompany me into the past and to the site of a ten thousand year old gateway to the lost city of Atlantis."

Tonks threw up her hands and sighed. "Memory charms it is, then."

"Not so fast, Tonks," I said. "Perhaps a demonstration?"

The Ring of Concealment was firmly in place on my right index finger. Any magic I did was completely and utterly untraceable to Harry Potter – which was good, as a lot of people wanted Harry Potter dead. I picked up Arnair's discarded newspaper and drew my wand.

"Portus." The hazy blue light that shrouded the paper made Arnair take a step back. "Grad a hold, guys. This should do some convincing..."

"This is a bad idea, Harry," Tonks said, placing her hand next to mine on the newspaper. "And we'll sort it out later. But why bother stopping your bad ideas now?"

I laughed. "Why, indeed?"

"What are you doing?" Grace Connor asked, stroking a wisp of her hair back behind her ear.

"Writing you all a tragedy. Here, touch the paper."

With a shrug, the young research assistant did. Fleur was next, placing her hand partly over mine. Last was Arnair, who looked not only confused but a little pissed off.

"Well?" he said.

"Well," I said. "The band's back together. Let's go..."

A whispered word, a whoosh of magic – we disappeared.

Jason and Grace arrived at my villa, through a keyhole in the ward platform, on their knees and reeling from the portkey travel. Disorientated and confused, I sat them down as Fleur went to get some drinks and Tonks stood by, twirling her wand. There was a lot for them to take in, a lot they had to know, before I even attempted to explain what was to be done with the Time-Turner.

So I sat them down and told them everything – mostly everything. I spoke of Atlantis, of Voldemort and the war to come. I scared them. I said nothing of my true time travel, of course, nor much of Chronos and Saturnia, but I said enough.

At first they scoffed. Then they doubted. After I conjured a rabbit from thin air they were frightened. There was no bitter anguish or violent

outbursts – this was the real world, not some story, and if I've learned anything over the long years it's that the real world is a lot less caring.

A lot less emotional.

In the real world shit just happens, and we deal with it.

Show me a hero and I'll write you a tragedy.

"Three, two, one..."

I flicked the Time-Turner back and the tiny hourglass began to spin. Pressed close together, between Fleur and Tonks, the chain just fit over all five of us. My headache didn't even let me see the world fade away and the spinning colours descend before it tore my skull in two and rent me asunder—

"He'll destroy this world a thousand times over before he accepts the inevitable. Some things are beyond redemption."

I glared. "Don't speak as if I'm not here."

"Look at him – he's mad! How many times has he already died? How many more times will he destroy himself? Again and AGAIN! He's insane, damn it!"

"He only has to win once, just once, to make the insanity matter..."

"But it doesn't matter, not to him – not to Harry fucking Potter. He's watched it all burn so many times that none of it matters! Even when it meant something to him, he couldn't win, and now look at what's left... and old man, withered by time, looking no older than sixteen."

I laughed aloud. "The chaos is beautiful tonight, isn't it?" I gazed out over the balcony at the wastelands of old London town, up at the sky and the roiling clouds of pure flame that stretched across the world, bathing the three of us in crimson light. There was no heat, there should have been heat. We were freezing.

"Even the cruelty has its beauty, ladies, never forget that."

—I awoke to the taste of blood. I knew that taste well, like burnt whiskey and stale cigar smoke.

My vision was blurred, my glasses were missing, and someone was dabbing a damp cloth across my forehead. Through the haze I saw a slim outline, blonde hair and great curves.

"I once saw a fight between a bird and a squirrel," I said, the effort tearing away at my bruised throat.

Fleur stopped dabbing my forehead. "Really, 'Arry? Who won?"

"A car." I grinned and Fleur chuckled, swatting me on the shoulder. "Time-Travel went as expected then?"

"Oui," she said, her tone neutral. "You vomited blood all over ze carpet as soon as we landed back here."

I took that in my stride. "How long have I been...?" But I knew the answer. The timer in my head spoke of half of day – so did the azure twilit sky beyond the shattered window. "Who broke the window?"

"You did."

"Oh."

"Your magic lashed out, 'Arry, as you were coughing up blood. This room iz a mess – we could not get near you for ten minutes before eet calmed down."

I grimaced. "Heh, curse these rampant hormones a'mine. Jason and Grace?"

"Jason is fascinated by what you 'ave shown him. The girl, Grace, she is less thrilled but I do not think frightened, non. Merely cautious." Fleur sat down on the bed next to me. "Reparo. Here are your glasses."

Her beauty came into startling focus as I slipped the lenses down over my eyes. She was gorgeous in the half-light, stunning. I must've looked like a corpse – one that'd been dead for days. Still, she leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek. It was a nice feeling.

"You cannot use ze Time-Turner again, 'Arry."

"No." I felt around my neck for the chain. It was gone.

"I took eet from you and gave eet to Tonks."

"You don't trust me?" I sighed. "Good idea. Time's up now anyway – we've got three days before Atlantis. Still with me?"

Her hand came down on my bare chest. A feather-light weight just above the bandages that crisscrossed my heart and side. "Where else would I be?"

Anywhere else, I almost said. But when I'm selfish, I'm really selfish. "Somewhere less exciting."

I claimed my feet and staggered over to the window. The view out over the lake and mountains beyond was idyllic, with the sun sinking behind thin stratus clouds and the Muggle town across the way lighting up for the impending darkness. Idyllic and peaceful.

Never mind the magical booby traps I'd laid, or the fog of war and the threat of annihilation on the horizon. There was no way I could save this part of the world and still gain Atlantis. Acceptable casualties were just that – acceptable. The lake would boil, the mountains would crumble, and Harry fucking Potter would forever ride the waves of time and crippled destiny.

Yee-haw!

"I'm taking Arnair up to the cavern. You're welcome to join us, Fleur."

"Oui. I will."

"Let the fun begin then."

It was a warm summer's evening – sprinkled twilight and a dash of magic in the air. The path up the mountain to the lost cavern within wasn't arduous to scale, and it gave me time to answer the questions Jason and Grace threw my way. They were many and varied, all to do with magic, and I answered them truthfully – holding nothing back.

I needed these people on my side, for the next few days at least. After that the war began in earnest, and I'd be hard pressed to keep up with all that was about to happen. Especially if using the Time-Turner caused me to vomit blood and black-out for the best part of a day. Time was turning against me in more ways than one.

Damn it all.

"So, you probably think you've stepped into some sort of messed-up fairytale or low-budget movie, guys, but we're playing for the whole wide world here." We approached the gaping maw of the cavern. Stars had come to life overhead. "Harry versus Voldemort... for the last time."

"What kind of a name is 'Voldemort'?" Grace asked, stumbling around the word.

"Stupid, isn't it? But there you go..."

Powdered rock and chips of granite crunched underfoot as we crested the final rise. I looked back down over the valley, glimpsing the lake and the Muggle town beyond. Trees blocked a view of the villa we were squatting in, but I didn't need to see it to know it was there. I was checking on something else.

"Hold up here just a minute," I said. We were at the edge of the cavern. A sheer drop of about two thousand feet gave way on the left. The doorway cut clean into the rock was dark and forbidding on the right. I drew my wand and rolled up the sleeve on my shirt to the elbow.

"What are you doing, 'Arry?" Fleur asked.

"Checking the wards," I replied, and placed the tip of my wand against my wrist. "Hazis." I drew three thick runes in black charcoal up my forearm. The first one began to glow with a pale blue light before I finished the last. Jason and Grace took a step back.

Fleur was impressed. "That's Symbolic Casting," she said. "You can do zat, too?"

I shrugged. I hadn't really known what I was doing until I was doing it. It was all there in my head, hidden beneath waves of burning lives and a relentless headache. This shit just came to me, usually when I needed it. I wasn't getting it for free, though, no... I had bled and died time and time again for the knowledge in my head. I'd given worlds to the relentless onslaught of chaos for this knowledge. Damn, damn, damn it all.

"Basic stuff," I lied. "I'm no runemancer, Fleur." Yes I was, just not yet. Once my memories sorted themselves out, and they would in Atlantis, I'd have magic beyond reckoning, matched only by the font of power Voldemort had tapped within the Lost City. "This is just to light up the countryside."

And to my eyes the valley and the lake within did begin to glow. The runes etched on my arm worked magic on my eyes so that I could see and examine the ward platform and spell network I'd constructed around the villa. It exploded to life below me. Great arches of invisible power, cords of green and blue and red, all shrouded in a thick golden twist that dashed through the trees and out over the lake. Almost every inch of ground, within half a mile of the villa, was soaked in trigger-spells and destructive wards.

"Good, good – onward we fare." The wards were doing fine.

Just as I was about to turn down and into the massive cavern, a snowy-white blur screeched at me from above and alighted on my shoulder. A slow smile spread across my face.

"An owl," Grace cooed. "Oh my, it's beautiful."

"Hedwig." She nipped my ear. "Ow, okay, I'm sorry. You've been playing catch-up for awhile haven't you?"

"Since my family home," Fleur said. "She is a very well trained bird, 'Arry."

I shook my head and stroked Hedwig's neck feathers. "She's loyal, not trained. She's a good friend..."

I led the way through the veil of darkness and into the cavern beyond. Hedwig hooted softly on my shoulder. It was really good to see her well after the mess in France.

We descended almost immediately into light. The runes gracing the walls, flowing across the impressive mosaic of Atlantis provided a stunning backdrop to the main event down in the heart of the massive hollowed-out mountain. I heard Arnair catch his breath, not for the mosaic, but for the intertwined obsidian gates.

Our own personal gateway to Hell knew how to draw the eye.

"You weren't kidding when you said you'd found something," Grace said, a hand to her breast. "This is incredible."

"This is just the beginning." I led everyone down the large stone steps, suspended on nothing but air, and onto the gateway plateau.

"How did you find this place, Harry?"

"Read about it, followed the clues... it was made to be found, Jason. Here." I unclasped my briefcase and pulled out the two halves of manuscript I'd recovered from opposite sides of the planet. "The Voynich Manuscript – on loan from your university. Heh."

Arnair blinked and pulled his eyes from the shining walls. "You stole this? There's uproar back in the States. This is a one of a kind, centuries old—"

"Actually, millenniums old, preserved by magic. And it's a key – one of three – that's going to open these dark pillars and show us the way to Atlantis."

"How?"

I handed the young professor the crinkled pages. Both halves of the script were drawn to one another, but now, in this place, the inert magic within was waking up. "Have a close look at the text. Tell me what you see..."

There was plenty of light by which to read. Arnair, with Grace looking over his shoulder, studied the pages I'd handed him. I stood idly next to Fleur in silence, giving the man a few minutes.

"They... they're changing," he said, after a time. "I mean, the words, whatever they say, its gibberish, are moving on the page."

I nodded. "It's not gibberish. It's ancient Atlantean. The cube I showed you in our office can serve as a crude Rosetta stone, and the second key to these gates, and with your clever memory you can write down the opening sequence as the manuscripts swirl through it."

"Really?" Fleur raised an eyebrow. "Zat iz how you are going to do it? Will eet work, I wonder?"

"It always does..." I muttered, running a hand back through my hair. "You'll need to get started right away. I think," I know " that the words in the manuscript are describing rune ciphers and codes, but they're always changing and resetting. It's your job, Arnair, to remember them all."

Arnair nodded. "Memory is easy – but I can't read this, Harry."

"You will." You have. I'd done this all before, time and time again, and I had the working of it down to a fine art. There were other ways it could be done, darker paths I could take, but this way, this path, had tested true nine times out of ten. "But you don't have to, either. If you

understand them, and I do, then runes speak to you of their design and intent. You just have to show me which ones to use."

It was different in the details every time – and that's why I couldn't just transcribe the last runes I had used to gain access in my last life and have the gates open. Time, the seconds and the space between seconds, altered the manuscript and the magic of the code. It would only work anew each time with a different code. Janus, that old conniving bastard, had more than accounted for the workings of the Infernal Clock in his map to the Lost City.

I had a begrudging respect for the long-dead wizard.

"What's the third key?" Grace asked.

She pulled me from my thoughts. "Hmm?"

"You said there were three keys to these... gates. One, the manuscript, two, the cube. I was just wondering what key number three is."

"Oh." I blinked. "Starlight – the runes have to be drawn in starlight."

"Why?" Fleur asked. "Why starlight?"

I grinned. "Because the explosion has to be strong enough to tear a hole between worlds."

A/N: This chapter could've gone on a whole lot longer (some 15,000 words), but a lot would've been lost in the translation, so I'm splitting it here and finishing the battle to come in the next chapter. A lot of it is already written, so don't expect that much of a wait.

Okay, so what have we learnt this time? Harry's being ravaged by time, he's going to be maimed, and Atlantis is only a chapter away. What're your thoughts, people, let me know in a review!

-Joe

Chapter 19 – One Po' Boy, Extra Mayo

Time to roll the dice.

~Mat Cauthon

The years will testify one thing...

I was a persistent bastard.

"So now you've seen it – what do you say, Arnair?"

"Honestly, I'm astounded."

Grouped in the front living room of our villa, the gentle fire casting flickering shadows across the walls, I absently stroked Hedwig's neck feathers, staring at nothing but the future. Fleur sat next to me on the sofa, on my right. Tonks was on the left. Their presence was comforting – a small grace.

"You'll help me," I said. It wasn't a question.

Across the room, seated next to Grace, Jason Arnair inclined his head. "Help you gain Atlantis to prevent a demonic madman named Lord Voldemort from destroying the world? To help stop a war between forces that defy all understanding of science and reason? Sure, I'll help."

I grinned. We weren't going to stop a war – we were going to start one. And finish one, I suppose. "Thank you" I looked to Grace. "Thank you both."

Hedwig hooted softly, a sound of whispered agreement. Smart bird, always has been. The letter Fleur had sent in Rome to her family should have made it into Dumbledore's hands by now. I wondered if he believed what she had written, or did he think I had assassinated

Thomas Laurent? Saturnia had killed the French politician, of that I was certain. But how to lay blame on a millennia-old demigoddess?

I had alibis, but Dumbledore would have figured out the Time-Turner I'd pinched from beneath the Magnus Fontis, he always did. I couldn't rely on the old man's trust, but what other choice did I have? Damn it all – things weren't spiralling out of control. They already had. I had to assume that, save for Fleur and Tonks, I had no magical allies I could rely on. And Tonks was a touch sketchy, too.

"What are you staring at, Harry?"

I blinked and fell out of my swirling thoughts. Tonks had spoken. I'd been staring at nothing but the cabinet on the far wall. "Is that a liquor cabinet?" I asked the room. "How did that slip by me?"

Hedwig fluttered over onto Fleur's knee as I stood up. I exhaled a long breath as the exertion pulled at my stitches – it was time to change those bandages – and stepped across the dimly lit room. Sure enough, the cabinet was locked. Without really thinking about it, I snapped my fingers and the door clicked open. Inside I found renewed hope that everything would be okay.

"Macallan's Single Malt Scotch Whisky... eighty years old." I cradled the bottle to my chest, wiping some of the dust away. "Ladies, and Jason, a toast!"

The cabinet held a set of crystal whiskey glasses and I set them out on the coffee table between the two sofas. "None for you, Hedwig, you're flying in the morning." I'd send Dumbledore a direct letter, begging for assistance. The consequences could go hang themselves.

"Aren't you a little young for this stuff?" Grace asked as I passed her a glass of amber liquid.

I grinned. "You're never too young to die, Grace." Heh, I knew that better than most. "Come on now, we've got to acknowledge the commitment we've just made – to ourselves, to Atlantis!"

Fleur shrugged and accepted a glass. Tonks looked like she had something to say, but decided against it. Maybe she really was on my side. Or maybe a little underage drinking was nothing compared to the other crimes I was guilty and/or accused of.

"There's magic in what we are," I said, holding my glass before me against the flames of the fire. The three ladies and Arnair joined me, looking a touch confused. "Real magic, folks, none of the flashing lights and broken Latin stuff we do every damn day. What we are is very rare."

We were the fire against the indifference to the threat of Voldemort. We were not a force of good, we were a force of necessity. I'd ended the world time and time again out of necessity. I shook my head and thought of what to say next – something meaningful that would inspire courage in my few precious companions. But there was nothing, and suddenly the very idea of it seemed absurd.

"Here's to magic," I said, raising my glass. I paused and then tossed the scotch back with a practiced flick, wincing as it burned down my throat. The others took small sips, savouring the taste.

"May it make sense with time," Jason added, inclining his glass towards me. He looked away. "It will get better with time..."

I had to remind myself that everything the man had known and understood about the world had been turned on its head today. It was easy to forget that this was his first time through this mess, first time for everyone... save me.

"No," I said. "No, no. Just liquor. Time's no good, Jason."

Time's a bitch.

Time's a headache and a sword through the heart.

But then time wounds all heels, doesn't it, John? And in the end it will settle all of our accounts with merciless efficiency. Now there's a dark, certain thought in a world where nothing is certain save uncertainty. Was I really that miserable?

Maybe I'm just insane – the lesser of two certainties. Oh well...

"Wonder what else they have on tap here..." I muttered, and turned back to the cabinet.

Just calm the fuck down.

I've got this.

As was to be expected, the next morning I woke early with a killer hangover. The headache was the same – relentless, pounding, unforgiving – but the sore eyes and groggy limbs were a new kind of torture. It was just dawn when I awoke, and I crawled down through the quiet villa to the kitchen with the stale taste of old booze in my mouth.

The liquor cabinet had held a few other bottles.

I held my head under the tap in the kitchen and began to sort through my thoughts of the day to come. It was 06:34 and fifty seconds and today Arnair would have to get to work on the Gates. I had to write a letter to Dumbledore – I couldn't risk actually going to see the old man, although it would be quicker. I was needed here, and in my current condition I wasn't certain I could take him in a fight. I needed the edge Atlantis would give me to be sure of that.

It was already a warm morning as I stepped outside for some fresh air. The rest of the house was still asleep, but Hedwig appeared from above as I sat on the stone steps overlooking the lake. The wind whistled through the trees and the waves lapped gently at the shore. It all felt peaceful, and it was.

"I need you to take an important letter to Professor Dumbledore later on today," I said, stroking her plumage. "But he can't get it too soon. Sorry to send you away again, Hedwig, but it really is important." I thought about the future. I thought about Atlantis. "I'm going somewhere you can't follow. Go stay with Hermione for the summer, okay, she'll be good to you."

Hedwig nudged my cheek with her head and hooted softly. She understood. My stomach rumbled. I had an urge for a big fried breakfast to soak up some of the previous evening's alcohol. I'd skipped dinner last night, too, in favour of a swift and sure sleep in whisky's warm embrace. I was famished.

"Good girl – now go have a nap. Come back when it's dark."

Tonks was awake and making coffee when I went back inside and into the kitchen. She looked great in the morning – dishevelled, her hair askew and a blur of crimson red and electric blue. She wasn't wearing her robes, just a shirt, shorts and a pair of baggy socks.

"Do you sleep in those fancy suits?" she asked me as I limped over to the magically cooled trunk we were using as an impromptu refrigerator.

I straightened my collar and smirked. "If I don't look the part, then how am I supposed to act the part?" I started pulling breakfast out of the trunk – there were eggs, some Italian bread, bacon, chicken breast, tomato... I had an idea. Was there garlic? Ah, a single clove.

"The part?" Tonks spooned in a healthy tablespoon of sugar into her coffee and sat stirring it idly, staring at me from behind her multicoloured fringe.

I deposited my ingredients on the marble countertop and began to sort the meat from the greens from the bread rolls. "I'm not much of a cook, Tonks, but I can make one helluva filling sandwich. You hungry?" She shrugged. "Sure you are. Want to give me a hand? Poach some eggs after I grill the chicken?"

Tonks smiled – an uncertain certainty this early in our game. "You know, despite the danger, Harry, I'm glad you're not cooped up in Privet Drive. It's a real dreary place."

"Tell me about it." I lit the stove, ignited the grill, and oiled a frying pan. "Chicken will take the longest. I'm glad you're here and not in Privet Drive, too."

"Really? I've been a bit of a killjoy to all your antics – someone has to be."

"Yet you haven't tried to stop me yet." I paused. "Except for taking the Time Turner and that bottle of whisky from me, you haven't stopped me. You trust me, which is worth more than all the gold in Gringotts... to me."

"You are supposed to be our Chosen One, Harry, and I get the feeling a lot of what you're doing is to stop You-Know—"

"Voldemort."

"Yes, him."

"It is – everything I do is to stop him." Worlds will unravel otherwise – again and again.

Tonks helped me make breakfast that morning. Italian herbs on the bread rolls added a touch of local flavour to the whole ordeal, and I wrapped the chicken breasts in crispy bacon, sliced tomato, diced onion, relish sauce, and topped off with a poached egg. There was no mayonnaise, unfortunately, but the smell of good honest food wafting through the villa brought the others to join us before it could all get cold.

We had sandwiches for breakfast, and they were good.

Afterwards, I wasted no time in taking Arnair and Grace back up to the Atlantis cavern. Today was the day it all began – or perhaps ended – the end of the beginning. I parted with the two conflicting halves of the Voynich Manuscript and the Atlantean cube I'd now stolen from Miguel Blue, and wished him the best of luck.

He wouldn't need it.

I'd seen Arnair's mind work again and again, faster than I could blink he solved problems, calculated probabilities... the man was made for this work. All he had to do was scribe the key runes as they appeared and as they reset within the manuscript. With enough of it recorded,

I'd be able to break the sequence. More than once Arnair had stumbled upon the sequence by himself – he was that good.

"So those obsidian pillars are some sort of magical gateway, Harry?" he asked, as I was about to disappear back down to the villa. A lot of supplies needed to be gathered for the... expedition.

"As best as I can explain it, yeah." I didn't look down into the cavern behind me, I knew what I'd find. "The man who constructed them sealed Atlantis away forever. It was meant to stay that way. But he was realistic enough to assume it wouldn't. Voldemort, through repeated mutilations of his soul, found a way."

"And if you don't follow... Voldemort?"

I grinned, wishing I had another breakfast sandwich. They were good. "He'll unleash the demonic forces of Hell that destroyed the Old World and pushed humanity back ten-thousand years, and send us right on over the brink of extinction."

Arnair paled. He heard the dread conviction in my voice. "Oh."

"Yeah." I slapped the young professor on the back. "But not to worry, eh, we've got about three days in this world to get to Atlantis. That's your job, mate. After that... well, time... time, is different in Atlantis. Stretched..."

"What do you mean?" Grace asked, her eyes wide and fascinated.

I looked to Arnair's research assistant. She was very young and very pretty. It would be best to send her home, really, save her the pain... but something made me hesitate. Some instinct, a gut-feeling. Everything had changed this time round – perhaps I needed a fresh face on the team.

I shook my head. For now, she would stay. "Just that we've got a long few months ahead of us in Atlantis." Maybe even the best part of a year, should things go my way – and they would. There was always the slim hope I could stop Voldemort while we were both in Atlantis. Slim, slim hope...

"Time will fly," I said. "For us, but not for the rest of the world. We'll be gone months and we'll be back before September 1st, just a little over four weeks from now." I paused. "You see, streeeeetched..."

I shrugged into my jacket, twirling a white rose between my fingers, and I could smell something... something familiar.

I was dressed in cheap leather and smelt like death.

Heh... viva la guilty!

A day later, I watched Hedwig fly off into the sky, swooping low over the lake with a parchment scroll clutched between her talons, before ascending on high over the snow-capped peaks in the distance.

She carried my letter to Dumbledore.

My request for aid that I didn't deserve, from an old man I had betrayed.

That it was only a slight betrayal, a brief lie, was perhaps worse than outright rebellion. I had played on his affection for me, and his conviction that I was equal to the task of fulfilling a prophecy we both despised. Even after all the years and all the lives, I hadn't yet found myself equal to that task.

Voldemort was deadly – he was powerful, merciless, and incomparably intelligent. I was all of those things, too. Yet I had a weakness that was also a strength, a flaw that could shake the world – I cared for people. I demanded the protection of innocence, as Voldemort raped it. Needless to say, my role was a whole lot harder.

There was so much more to lose.

I turned from the balcony of our villa, overlooking that deep and secretive lake, and stepped back inside. It was a warm day, and warmer still inside the villa. I felt like a Coke and a smoke.

The hallway was lined with the travelling trunks Fleur and I had purchased in New York, and they were all stocked and ready to go. We'd cleaned out the markets over in the Muggle town across the lake. Some of them held perishables, and were chilled, but the majority of them held shelf-stable stuff that would keep for months if not years. A few of the trunks off to the side held other gear – also purchased in New York – including but not limited to broomsticks and vials upon vials of different potions.

I had Atlantis down to a fine art when things went my way, and I knew exactly what was needed. Still, things were different this time. I'd erred on the side of caution and doubled the amount of food I usually brought along. The magically-expanded trunks had no problem containing it all. There was nothing where we were going – and one couldn't survive long on conjured biscuits and tea.

"It's done," I told Tonks upon entering the living room.

Tonks had shrugged out of her Auror robes and was polishing her wand on the glass coffee table. She looked up and grinned – an almost cheeky grin. "It's the right thing to do, Harry. Dumbledore will help."

I wasn't so sure. It was fifty-fifty, really. More than once, lives and lives ago, after I'd abused his trust and before I'd gained the independence I had now, the foreknowledge, he'd had me suffocated within Order Headquarters. I didn't want to have to fight him – it wasn't a fight either of us could win.

"We've got two days before the shit hits the fan, Tonks." I sat down next to her, close enough to nudge her leg with my own. "Maybe just a day and a half, depending on the antics of our demigod friend."

"Chronos," she said. "Surely he's just a wizard, Harry, not anything more..."

I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth. "Voldemort is just a wizard, and yet there's more to him than meets the eye. Chronos' magic can be defeated, but I burned him alive with fiendfyre and a

day later we're eating ice cream in Rome..." I shook my head. "He's something more than meets the eye."

"What 'more' is there?"

That I didn't know, but it involved Time. Real Time, not the paltry seconds and minutes we mark on the faces of our clocks. I had the strangest feeling that I'd been here before – *déjà vu*, can ya dig it? – but of course I have, only it was more than that. The Infernal Clock in the heart of Atlantis was calling out to me across the vast, impenetrable void that separated worlds – a void Voldemort and I could penetrate. The Infernal Clock was calling, shouting – it was singing a song that would end the world.

More than I can handle, Tonks, I almost said, but what kind of hero would I be then? What kind of leader? What manner of 'Chosen One'? Never mind the latter, prophecy be damned, I was Harry fucking Potter, and the forces of time danced around my head – I wouldn't be pulled along their vague strings of bitter prophecy.

No, I was here because I chose to be here – prophecy had nothing to do with it.

"You ever listen to The Beatles, Tonks?" I asked. "Sure you did, growing up in the Muggle world... Those four boys ruled the world, that's what she said."

"What are you talking about?"

"When you're drowning, you don't say 'I would be incredibly pleased if someone would have the foresight to notice me drowning and come and help me,' you just scream." Saturnia had been screaming at me, back in Rome, of that I was sure. Screaming what? "John Lennon said that, 1970."

"What has that got to do with the price of—?"

Screaming for help? Sure, why not? We were all doing the same. "Nothing," I said, and gave Tonks' shoulder a squeeze. "Thanks for pushing me towards Dumbledore. It was the right thing to do."

"You'd be stupid not to want the greatest wizard in the world on your side, Harry."

Yes, I would be. I was on no one's side but my own, and that was a side that wanted the world to survive the coming inferno. Despite how many times I'd watched it succumb to the chaotic flames of the apocalypse, I still wanted that fabled happy ending.

But with Fleur or with Tonks at my side? I was thinking too far ahead there.

"You okay, Harry?" Tonks put her wand aside and put her hand against my forehead. "You look tired."

"Bit of a headache," I said – understatement of the year. "Not to worry."

"I'm your guardian – and your friend – I worry."

"You're coming with me to Atlantis, right?"

Tonks appraised me from behind a pair of eyes that shone blue then green then incandescent purple. She was a gorgeous creature, touched by magic, and capable of so much. "You've found something up in that cave, Harry... if it leads to the Lost City then you won't be able to tear me away."

I grinned. "Adventure it is, then."

"Why'd you think I became an Auror? Or joined the Order?"

"To protect handsome Chosen Ones like me?"

"No, for the sheer thrill of it." Tonks beamed, her hair shading with the burnished ringlets of auburn amusement. "For the rush, Harry, and

because if someone wants to hurt handsome Chosen Ones, then I get to stick my wand in his face and blast him across a room."

This is why I loved Tonks. She wasn't burdened by the oppressive weight of what lay before us. Maybe she was a touch ignorant, but even then, she'd do the job with a bubblegum pink smile. Not to say the pressure or the fatigue never got to her, but she never let it beat her down into the ground.

"There'll be plenty of chances for that. Atlantis is held by the Death Eaters."

"So you say, and I wonder how you know." Tonks looked through my fringe at the vivid scar marking me as equal to a madman. "Can he see your mind, too?"

"No, not yet."

Tonks searched for something to say, something to negate the monstrous link to a soul-torn Dark Lord. "Good," she eventually said. "Good then."

I left Tonks to finish cleaning her wand and made my way into the kitchen for that Coke I'd craved earlier. It was addictive stuff, no doubts there, but you only live once... With Arnair and Grace up in the cavern, the villa was a quiet place. I knew Fleur to be about, so I set off to find her. She could only be upstairs, maybe in her room. I took her a Coke – she had only just discovered the Muggle drink, and was infatuated with it.

Bright summer sunlight filtered in through the skylight overhead in the hallway upstairs. "Fleur?"

"In here, 'Arry."

I followed her voice down the hall and into the room she was using. The door was ajar, and the subtle scent of strawberries and rainfall drew me in and left me wanting to sit down and sigh. I was a long way past regret in my life (lives), but I still couldn't help but want at these simple moments of perdition.

Fleur was seated in the window box that looked out over the lake and mountains. The sun caught her just right, lounging as she was in a strapless dress of white silk that stopped just short of her knees. A golden halo of energy seemed to cling to her form, to follow her curves from her bare feet up to her avian-like face.

My heart skipped a few beats. I felt a familiar surge of longing – of raw desire. She wasn't just gorgeous, she was bloody hot.

"You are staring, 'Arry." Fleur had been reading a thin book and she closed it into her lap as I blinked and stepped across the room.

"Sorry – breathtaking view up here, is all."

Fleur smiled, catching the not-so-subtle compliment in my words. She accepted the Coke with a word of thanks and twisted the screw-cap off, releasing that satisfying hiss of bubbles.

"The first sip is always the best, the fizziest." Fleur moved over so I could sit down next to her in the window seat. I took the seat, enjoying the sun and the shape of her legs. "Good book?"

"Hard to tell," she said. "I found it on ze shelf over there. Eet is in English, which I do not read as well as I speak."

I glanced down at the cover of the book, at the title. The Gunslinger, by Stephen King. A Muggle book – there was a grizzled man on the cover who looked a little like an old western cowboy. Behind the man was a tower of black stone, rising up beyond the cover to some unknown and distant height.

"What's it about?"

"I am not so sure, but so far ze protagonist 'as killed over five dozen people, and I'm only on ze second chapter. He uses Muggle weapons, and seems to be chasing someone across a desert on some sort of quest."

"Sounds brutal."

Fleur shrugged. "Reading helps finetune my English." She waved her hand back and forth and took a sip of her drink. "A leetle anyway."

"You might want to pack some books for Atlantis, then, to pass the time."

Fleur laughed. "I think, perhaps, there will be more interesting things to be doing than reading. Non?"

I couldn't argue with that. "There'll be a Dark Lord, a slew of dark wizards, and his demon entourage standing in our way, too. Are you ready for that?"

No one could be ready for that. It would take the heat of the moment, and the urge to fight back, to even begin to comprehend the danger of what we were walking into. I'd explained it as best I could, to both Fleur and Tonks, and they still decided to come with me. Of course they did. I offered adventure and inspired such cruel, bitter loyalty.

"You will protect me, 'Arry, from goblins, and dark wizards, and demons, and whatever else 'appens to try and kill us." Her eyes flashed. "And if you don't, then I will protect myself."

There was fire in her words, true fire – and that was why I loved Fleur, just as I loved Tonks. Two more certain uncertainties in a world I had broken time and time again.

"You kissed me," I said, changing the subject rather abruptly.

"Oui. And you kissed me back."

"May I kiss you again?"

Fleur leaned in so close that our noses almost touched. "Non," she said, her breath warm against my face. Then she pressed her lips against mine softly, just for a heartbeat.

I sighed, enjoying her secret smile and affection. "Please do that again..."

She pulled away – all grace and elegance and stolen promise. "Maybe later, 'Arry Potter..."

Before I could say anything in reply, a hurried shout echoed throughout the house. 'HARRY!'

Oh God damn Fate's perfect, perfect timing.

It was Grace – her voice panicked but not terrified. Still, even panic was cause for concern. Had some of my enemies come early? Was Chronos perhaps in one of his moods? Had something happened to Arnair? I hated not knowing what was going to happen next. I was almost as blind to the future as everyone else. Almost.

All of this flashed through my mind in those brief moments between seconds. My body was already jumping into action, pelting full speed out of Fleur's room, across the hall and sliding down the marble banister on the stairs. Fleur was hot on my heels.

Grace stood in the doorway. She seemed to be in one piece. Her hair was a bit askew, wind-blown, as if she'd been running, and her eyes held the same panic her voice had.

"What's the matter?" I said, stepping forward. I noted that at some point between here and upstairs my wand had made it into my hand.

Grace eyed the holly stick warily, breathing heavily. She had been running. "It just appeared," she gasped. "We weren't even touching anything." I had no clue what she was babbling about. "Jason's still up there with it—"

POP!

I Apparated through the key in my wards, wasting no time on making my way up to the cavern. Whatever 'it' was with Arnair, if it hadn't already gutted him and left, was going to burn.

I reappeared just at the mouth of the cavern and darted into the darkness, wand at the ready. I leapt down the steps into the main

cathedral-like space, the thousands and thousands of runes on the rotund walls lighting the way. Atlantis, the shining spires and flying galleons, looked on at my passage with remarkable gallant indifference.

Almost at once I saw the nature of the threat, and it gave me pause.

Arnair was fine, standing off to one side with his chin resting on his thumb. I could see his mind working furiously behind the wire-framed glasses he wore, much like my own. He dared not approach the thing that had made an appearance in the centre of the plateau that held the mighty, massive obsidian gates to Atlantis.

"It just appeared out of nowhere?" I asked the professor as we drew level. Off to the side, a few of the supply trunks had already been brought up for the trip across, and to keep Arnair and Grace well-nourished while they worked up here. I saw dozens of notebooks open and scrawled with runes. The Voynich Manuscript, both halves, rested at ease on top of one of the trunks.

"As if by magic," the man said, a small attempt at humour. Humour was good – it meant he hadn't lost his considerable mind.

A pedestal of clear green marble, shaped like a pyramid and a clear six feet across had appeared in the centre of the plateau. It was clear-cut rock, smelling of cool earth and possessed of an inert strength.

"And you're okay?"

Arnair chuckled. "Despite my perpetual state of confusion and terror, yes. What is that?"

I stepped across to the pedestal. There was something sticking out of the top of the pyramid. Something familiar. As I drew closer I saw letters burnt into the marble – words that shone with fiery promise:

Who so Pulleth Out this Sword of this Stone and Anvil, is Rightwise King Born of England.

"Oh... he's just taking the piss now," I said.

It was the sword shaped like the ornate hand of an old clock. A weapon Chronos had offered to me once before, and which I had cast aside. He'd led me to believe it was a weapon forged of Time itself, capable of killing the Orc-Mare when they robbed me of my magic. A weapon against the impossible.

"You didn't touch it, did you?"

"I'm not as stupid as I look," Arnair said.

"Right. Sorry."

I was sorely tempted to touch it. The handle of gilded silver metal was calling out to me, whispering in my mind. There was no preamble, no second-guessing myself. The blade wanted me to pull it free – and in so doing I'd be dancing to Chronos' tune. Or would I? His double nature was impossible to predict or even understand... was this meant to aid me or harm me?

Chances are it was probably to do both – praise be to symmetrical duality and all of that crap.

I muttered a few diagnostic spells and knelt down on one knee. With my wand tip alight like an arc welder I scorched some runes into the stone, testing the pedestal for any residual magic or hidden traps. It all came up clean, which didn't tell me much, really.

"Okay..."

Would I need the sword in days to come? Was a man whose very nature made him my enemy setting me up for a fall? The blade seemed to be nothing more than metal – it tested as such, but what if I touched it? Would I lose a hand, an arm? Would it kill me?

"How are the runes coming along?" I asked Arnair, distracting myself from this latest problem. "Making any progress?"

"I think so," he replied, tapping his chin and staring between me and the sword. "The cube reacts to the manuscript, turning the gibberish into a steady flow – you were right, it is a code of some sort. A base pattern keeps repeating over and over, and then every one hundredth time it skips a beat and the pattern changes. The whole cycle takes about ninety minutes."

I nodded. "That's the code. You need to keep track of it, it'll keep changing. You've not seen it all yet."

"If you say so..."

"I do." Well, that only left the sword. "It may be cool to be king..."

I decided to err on the side of recklessness. I stepped forward and gripped the silver hilt of the blade. I tensed, expecting to be struck down by gods or demons or worse, but felt nothing but a sense of mounting relief. The sword slid from the stone like a knife through butter.

I'd expected it to be heavy, but it was light – really light. Despite that, even in the dull light of the cavern I could see that the double edge of the blade was razor-sharp. A good thwack with this thing would see anyone off. The metal was cool and... calm – ready. I took a step back from the pedestal and the entire pyramid block crumbled into dust.

"So now I have a sword." I raised an eyebrow and grinned at Arnair. "Let's put it out of sight for now."

I buried it in the bottom of one of the trunks containing our travel supplies, buried it under cans of soup and other staples. I didn't know if I'd need the blade, or if it would even do as promised, but why not add another weapon to my arsenal? When – not if – when it came back to bite me in the ass, perhaps Chronos would finally see that he couldn't push me around.

They would all see, 'fore I was done.

The Infernal Clock demands that you scream – and that you scream good and loud.

It is good to remember that Time is deaf to your pleas for mercy. Were it not so, then all would be meaningless.

The attack came on the fifth day – as planned and as promised.

With the sun having risen a few hours ago, the five of us had had our last breakfast at the villa – for better or for worse – and packed up the remainder of our belongings, which I then apparated up to the cavern.

Jason, Grace, Fleur, and Tonks were already up there. I was back at the villa on my own, waiting for the inevitable. The obsidian pillars were already opening – the Gates to Atlantis were cracking. Arnair, with a final push, had cracked the code last night, and as I'd expected he'd begun to anticipate the pattern. His mind was astounding. He was a Muggle who could predict runic magic. There was perhaps more magic in that than in this whole sordid affair.

Either way, the gate was opening. It would still take a few hours and the rest of the starlight, but the pillars of cool black rock would give way all too soon. I just had to hold out until then – and toss the final key, my Ring of Concealment, into the gaping maw that would arise. Then we were gravy, baby.

"Hey Jude..." I mumbled, sitting on the balcony out front of the villa, looking down for the last time over the expansive lake. I was strumming on an old guitar I'd found in the master bedroom. It was missing a string, completely out of tune, and I had no idea how to play the thing. But I strummed nonetheless – there was timid peace in absurdity, always had been. "Remember to let her into your heart... then you can start... do-du-du-du... Hey Jude, begin..."

I sighed and just idly pulled at the strings, basking in the light of another perfect summer's day. I enjoyed the sky while I could – in a few hours there would be no more clear blue sky, not where I was going. It had been a long few weeks to this point.

A long few weeks, indeed. A small, young part of me was excited and nervous about the coming expedition into the Old World, into Atlantis. A larger, older part was simply numb and tired – wanting it all to be over. It would be all too easy to spiral into regret, but where was the fun in that? And what use would I be then?

"Harry James Potter."

"Hey, Chronos," I said, slipping out of my thoughts. "Saturnia not with you?"

Chronos, looking no older than my good self, took a seat on the balcony next to me. I wondered what he truly was, what manner of ancient magical being I had attracted. A demigod, perhaps, but my magic was stronger, smarter...

"Saturnia is playing a game of her own devising, Harry Potter, yes, yes." Chronos chuckled. "She is beautiful and deadly and all manner of trouble – rather like you and Miss Fleur Delacour."

Couldn't argue with that. "Why do you want Atlantis?" I asked.

"Power."

That was too simple, too poor a motive. "I don't believe you."

"Trust is not something that can stand the test of time, is it?" Chronos sighed and took the guitar from me. He began to play, softly but surely, making fine music with only five frayed strings. "Not much can stand that test – you least of all, Harry Potter."

"Cute trick with the sword, by the way. We're nothing without a sense of humour, hmm."

Chronos grinned, looking out over the lake as I had done. "You need it, you really do."

"I don't know why I'm not blasting you apart right now," I said, looking down at my hands. "I can't seem to care..."

"There's that test of time again. How can you care about what has already been lost so many times?" Giving the guitar up, Chronos let it fall over the edge of the balcony. It hit the limestone courtyard below, splitting down the middle. "Everything to chaos, Harry Potter, even your relentless soul and defiance."

I felt that old familiar pall of unimaginable darkness, of bitter defeat so final that time would not fix it – not ever. "Leave me be, mate," I said. "Just walk away."

"I can't do that – could you?"

I shook my head. "Of course not. All my many and varied enemies are here then?"

"You've got about three minutes before a joint force of Italian and French Aurors storm this villa, Harry Potter. The grushtva – the goblins, as you call them – are tracking the Aurors to you. They bring mercenaries and bounty hunters with them."

"And you? What of your interference?"

Chronos shrugged. "You've opened the way, Harry James Potter. All bets are off. It was truly a pleasure to know you – my Orc-Mare will attack and scatter the field. They thirst for your heart's flesh."

I met his eyes, my face blank. "You know, if you helped me, we could take on the Dark Lord Voldemort together and perhaps stop the world from ending – delay that universal chaos you say is inevitable." I took a breath. "As allies we could win the coming war, and I could stop the grinding on the Infernal Clock."

For a long moment Chronos stared at me – and his emotions betrayed him. He looked all at once terrified, horrified, desperately hopeful, and painfully angry. "For all you know of time, Harry," he whispered, using just my first name – he almost seemed human. "For all you know of time, you are still an ignorant child. You cannot change what has already happened."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I can."

"Why so sure?" The bitterness in his voice tried and failed to wither my resolve.

"Because this time is different. You've made it so."

Chronos' ire vanished and he chuckled. "Same old mistakes in brand new ways, Harry Potter. Don't you ever forget that."

And then he was gone. No pop, no drifting or fading away. Just gone in the space between one heartbeat and the next.

So the attack came on the fifth day – as planned and as promised. It came over the splintered remains of an old guitar and the last of my good intentions.

The Aurors appeared on the edge of the lake, on the edge of the anti-apparation wards. First six, then another wave of six, then another, and then another. Twenty-four through the front door, dressed in their dark battle robes. I could almost see the spells and wards running through their clothing, turning the cloth into reinforced armour. There'd be more heading around the back way, of that I was sure.

It was Battle Tactics 101, and just plain old common sense. I'd have to keep the fight down here for now, so Tonks and Fleur had a chance up at the cavern. Also, I'd have to be careful not to kill any of these hopeless bastards. That would turn Dumbledore against me forever, and make me the very thing I fought and raged so hard against.

The forthcoming teams of six spread out, covering the approach. They spotted me straight away, as I stood on the balcony ledge with my hands folded behind my back. I clutched my wand, watching the pieces take position...

"Good day, ladies and gentlemen," I said, as the teams fanned out across the courtyard. Twenty four wand points levelled against my head and my heart. "How may I help you?"

"Harry James Potter?" an older woman said at the head of the first team. Her hair was short, clipped and greying, her features sharp and toned –her English accented Italian.

"Yes, that's me."

"I am Auror Maxine Moredount, Italian Ministry of Magical Law Enforcement. You will come with us," she said.

"No, I won't."

The Aurors visibly tensed. I saw a few cold masks slip into place, ready to take down a young and arrogant teen wizard.

"You are aware of your 'wanted' status?" the woman, Moredount, asked. "You are wanted on charges of international assassination, of Thomas Laurent. You also need to explain how and when you bypassed several international border checkpoints, and divulge the location of Miss Fleur Delacour."

The wind was blowing in fresh off the lake, the sun was high overhead. It was a beautiful day, summer at its best. I missed the towering spires and the ancient stone of Hogwarts. I missed my friends, my younger friends – Ron, Hermione – who were all still innocent in all of this.

I cut to the damn chase. "Auror Moredount, I refute the majority of those charges, and suggest you add excessive use of underage magic to the list, as well as profiting from the proceeds of crime," thanks a lot Miguel Blue, "and I'm pretty sure I burnt down a hotel on the Italian coast, in Tivoli, although that may have been a demigoddess named Saturnia."

"You—"

I waved her away. "Yes, I know I'm surrounded. Yes, I know you are all very highly trained." I paused and my flippant tone took a deadly serious turn. "However, I am much better trained. I've been doing this a lot longer than you. Please believe me when I say it will be in your

best interests to simply walk away today. There are events in motion you cannot begin to fathom." I barely fathomed them.

I could see the woman actually contemplate my words – for all of about two seconds – I was certainly a high profile target, after all. Who knew what I was really capable of? She was going to risk it, that's what Aurors did.

"This is your last chance to surrender of your own accord, Mr. Potter."

"This is your last chance to walk away with everyone alive," I replied. "There are demons on the way, lady, demons with big shiny swords." And goblins, and bounty hunters. "No? Very well then. But before you start throwing curses around, please know one thing."

I held up my hand – a professor about to educate the class on something very basic. I let the moment stretch on as the Aurors all began to take steps towards me, Moredount at the head of the pack.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said. "You are standing in one of the most complex and haphazardly put together ward platforms in the whole wide world. As soon as you entered the courtyard you triggered about two dozen different defensive networks I have in place around this humble villa." I laughed aloud. "These are very... aggressive defensive measures, some of them not seen in a very long age, and do not take kindly to anything that endangers my wellbeing." That was fair warning. "So with that in mind –

please, someone, throw a spell at me and watch the magic fly!"

"Stupefy!"

An old favourite – weak and ineffective against anyone with a lick of magical talent. I stood grinning, rocking on the balls of my feet, as the jet of thin red light flew towards me from the tip of Moredount's wand. It covered the distance between us in two seconds flat, a blow not aimed to kill, which was something...

I caught the spell at the last, most dramatic, moment.

My left hand was raised before me, palm outwards, and the stream of stunning magic floated half a scant inch above my skin, turning on invisible strings and spinning into a sphere of contained energy. I turned my hand to face the sky and the ball of energy turned with it, looking almost like condensed liquid fire in the morning light.

"A stunning spell doesn't really endanger my life," I said into the silence that followed my display of the impossible. "And is rather insulting, really, considering the charges you've laid against me." I clenched my hand into a fist, snuffing out the light of the stunning spell. Sparks of magical energy ricocheted through the minute gaps between my fingers. "They don't teach spell catching in Auror school, do they?"

I laughed and for the first time brandished my wand, the old holly and phoenix feather with all its dents and scars. I hadn't had a damn clue I could 'catch' that spell until I'd gone and done it. My mind was racing, my headache pounding. Could I hear the bitter laughter of past lives in the back of my head? I thought so.

Dumbledore couldn't catch spells. I was coming into my own more and more every day, every minute – magic I'd torched worlds for was all there, sliding into place and forced by the urges of necessity.

"Impressive, Potter." Moredount sneered. "Let's see you do it again. Kellie, Rawks, Mathin – on my mark." The four separate Auror teams of six readied themselves. I was an easy target, after all. "Voliox!"

Half a dozen verbal and non-verbal spells were cast towards me, the noise and the silence a screen to confuse me. I didn't need to know what the other spells were, because I'd heard Moredount's – an incapacitation curse, designed to temporarily paralyse. It was enough to trigger my wards.

Pools of green light, ringed with electric blue spheres, rose from within the courtyard itself. Five, ten, fifteen... twenty-two of them. In the space between seconds my wards activated, and the pools of light shot skyward, shot towards me in order to intercept the half dozen spells.

The light took shape in mid-air. The blue spheres rippled through the transparent green mist and took form – human form. Seven feet tall and faceless, the constructs of light and energy slammed themselves into the streams of spellwork shooting towards me and absorbed the blows, one by one.

Again, I hadn't been sure the wards would work until they did. This was all new to me, to a part of me anyway. A part big enough to doubt.

Twenty-two ghostly constructs of magical energy hovered between me and the regiment of Aurors. They were semi-transparent, thin but fast, and their presence made the air thrum with energy – with real magic unleashed. I was protected by a battalion of my own, one that would die before it let harm come to me.

"Ward constructs," I called into the silence once again. "Not even Hogwarts has these, ladies and gentlemen." My voice took on an edge of raw command. "This is your one and only chance to surrender, to leave now without a fuss. You cannot hope to capture or defeat me... I am Harry Potter!"

The last I roared into the courtyard below, magic amplifying my voice so it echoed and screamed out into the valley and across the lake.

The Aurors attacked in earnest, and my ward constructs took the blows of all the magic as I turned and dashed down the steps. Twenty-four Aurors casting twenty-four spells again and again after me as I turned and ran made the air as hot as an oven in a matter of seconds.

My fine leather shoes hit the courtyard at a dash, ward constructs dancing around me, enclosing me in a net of magic. I was spinning my wand around and around in my hand, the tip glowing a fierce crimson red and playing against the limestone. The world was awash with a rainbow of varying magical colour.

"Nevus-nevo-nevus!" I pointed my wand towards the sky. "Stupefy!"

Weak and ineffective, I know, but not how I used it. One solid beam of energy exploded out of the tip of my wand, travelling faster than the eye could follow. It shot into the air on the intent of my first incantation – a stunning spell amplified with magic not seen for centuries. As it cleared the constructs my spell split into a dozen smaller beams of energy, all a part of the whole that was, and rained down upon the courtyard.

Aurors dived out of the way. Some took the attack on their robes and were rocked backwards by the sheer power of my assault. In the confusion, I shot around the side of the villa, my constructs forming a collective barrier as my pursuers... pursued.

From the villa I turned east into the thick forest that surrounded the house on all sides save the front. I caught sight of at least ten more Aurors sneaking around the back of the house. They took one look at me fleeing, surrounded by magical bodyguards, and unleashed their wands against me.

I dashed under the eaves of the forest, out of direct sunlight, as curses and hexes tore into the ground, tossing up dirt and moss, tore into trees, stripping bark, and tore into my constructs, which were absorbing all the magic they could before they expired. There was a lifespan to these things, and maintaining their presence was a drain on my abilities, but they'd already saved me a hundred times over.

Still, I watched the first two blink out of existence as the strain of the spell barrage overloaded their relatively simple design. The remaining twenty constructs didn't notice and nor did they care for the loss of two of their number. They simply filled the gap left in the defences, and continued to accept the damage without wavering.

I was heading into the forest to even the numbers a little bit, to split the Aurors down the middle, and to eventually make my way up to the cavern – after I'd dealt with my pursuers.

I wasn't aiming to kill, not at all. These men and women were innocent, for the most part, and simply misguided. Just doing their jobs for all the wrong reasons. They were good Aurors, and would be needed in the war that was to come. No, I wasn't aiming to kill.

Goblins won't be far behind... I thought. Probably already here somewhere, waiting their chance.

My ward platform prevented Apparation for the best part of a mile in any direction from the villa. But the Aurors were physically fit, and I was out of my time and not at my best. The spells continued to track me, to dissolve against my constructs. I glanced over my shoulder as I ran, and saw the Aurors keeping steady, powering curse after curse into my ethereal bodyguards.

Have to account for Chronos and the Orc-Mare, too. He'd promised as much. Things were going to get very interesting.

I darted through the trees, sunlight filtering in around me through a thick canopy overhead. The forest smelt fresh, alive – vibrant with life and magic. I set it on fire.

"Incendios Grata!"

A torrent of superheated flame burst from my wand and the dry summer wood went up in smoke. The flames would spread quickly, creating a dense smokescreen and raging inferno that would split the Aurors further. And if it didn't, then the rest of my wards would.

"Incendios Grata! Incendios Grata! Incendios Grata!" Burn, baby, burn!

They'd had enough time to follow me from the villa. I clicked my fingers, muttered a ward key, and two hundred metres behind me the villa exploded in a wave of raw disintegrating magic. I felt the shockwave even at my extended distance, threatening to pick me up and throw me down, but I kept my feet. There would be more fire now.

The uneven forest floor slowed my progress through the wood, yet it also provided a shade of extra cover from the increasingly inventive spells being cast my way. From the shouts and screams I could hear in my wake, the Aurors had cast aside the notion of simple stunning spells and incapacitation jinxes, and were out for my blood.

Good. Excellent, in fact.

A quarter mile into the forest I turned to make something of a stand. The heat from the fires I'd started was already stifling. Magic fire was so much more potent, hungrier, than your average flame. Great swirls and clouds of grey smoke billowed between the trees, obscuring the Aurors from one another – and my good self.

I stood on a small rise, my back to a strong evergreen, and began to twirl my wand in vigorous, almost desperate, movements.

"He's over there!"

"Look there – through the trees!"

"His ward guardians—"

I'd been spotted, of course. Aurors advanced through the smoke with deadly intent, running right on my heels to bring me down.

I muttered spellwork under my breath as my wand tip began to glow bright silver. The air about me began to shake with potential. With a cry I fell to one knee and buried the tip of my wand in the dirt – it cut through the ground with ease.

I slashed a rune as quick as I could – back, around, up, and across through the heart. It was a key rune, a lesser rune of the Master Order, and it was the missing link in the network all around me.

As I completed the rune the gouge in the earth pooled with pure silver light, and the trees all around me responded. Runes I'd carved into the bark earlier in the week came to life, flared to life. The trees began to groan... and sway.

And then uproot themselves to do battle with the Aurors.

Cool special effects, I thought, as a few dozen Whomping Willows on speed advanced on the Auror brigade. Thick branches swatted the Aurors aside like pesky ants – not strong enough to do any real damage, but more than enough to knock the wind out of them. Roots

buried for centuries tore up out of the cold earth, sending great clods of dirt and woody shrapnel hurtling through the air.

The forest came alive in my defence. Well... a few dozen trees did, anyway.

Whilst holding off an entire battalion of experienced Aurors all on my own was singularly impressive, I had no doubt that reinforcements would be on the way – and there was still the unaccounted for true enemies Chronos had promised me. Goblins and worse.

I wasn't foolish enough to become overconfident, however brazen and carefree I may appear.

So I turned and ran while I had the time, my ward constructs spinning ever faster around me, disappearing deeper into the forest to plan my next move.

How could I ever make this life bearable?

Just whisper words of wisdom and let it be, right, fellas?

What remained of the morning wore away into early afternoon with considerable haste. I stopped running to catch my breath behind a broad evergreen so far untouched by my many fires.

I was weary and out of breath, suffering from a few cuts and bruises and a bit of minor spell damage. The fire had really taken hold in the forest now, burning through the old wood in a fury. I had succeeded in splitting the Aurors into more manageable chunks.

My ward constructs were all but gone. Two pale and barely held together wraithlike forms glided around me. A few more spells and they'd be done in. The Aurors were getting increasingly desperate, but reinforcements had arrived from Rome at some point. I'd been attacking small groups of them all day now, disarming them and destroying their wands – forcing them from the field.

A few I'd been forced to incapacitate, but so far I'd claimed no lives. Which meant I was winning, even if I couldn't seem to shake the battalions of French and Italian forces. There had also been no hint of goblins or bounty hunters, nor any sign of the Orc-Mare, which was giving me hope that perhaps we'd be spared that nonsense today.

"He went this way," a young, female voice said – not more than fifteen feet away.

"Are you sure? All this damn forest looks the same..." A man, young, as well.

"He's heading up the mountain, has been all day." That made three.

"Come on, he can't keep this up much longer."

"Wanna bet?" I asked, stepping out from behind my tree, wand at the ready. "Wow, you're a pretty one..."

The female Auror scowled and brandished her wand, as did her male counterparts. They spread out to flank me. My constructs couldn't defend from three separate angles – they hovered at the ready just in front and to either side.

Leaves and dry twigs crunched underfoot as the Aurors stepped around me. I moved with them, drawing circles in the small clearing we found ourselves in. I had an annoying, no doubt frustrating, grin on my face.

"Depulso!" the young woman cried, sending a banishment hex my way –she thought to smash me against the tree at my back. Her sharp raptor-gaze betrayed her anger and the spell slammed into one of my constructs with all the force of a sledgehammer.

The construct took the blow and shattered – sparks flew in all directions, hot and sure.

I liked her style – brutal and effective. Her blue eyes and brunette ringlets reminded me of Tonks when she wasn't playing around with her special abilities. Still, she was trying very hard to best me.

I responded with a blasting curse. "Confringo!" Not at the woman, but at the ground at her feet. The earth exploded in a surge of soil and stone, sending her reeling back.

Her two associates entered the fray at the same time as I cast my curse. Two twin jets of sickly purple light shot through the air toward me, barely ten feet away – bone-breaking hexes from the look of them.

My final construct leapt on top of one and exploded in a shower of silvery-blue sparks. I pulled a shield into existence, bulging at the centre for the second, and the purple stream ricocheted back upon its caster. He dived out of the way, already casting at me again.

I battled the two of them for a few seconds, enjoying the rush and laughing at the spells they tossed towards me. I caught one of the Aurors in a body-bind and he fell rigid to the forest floor. The other knew the odds were against him but he persevered – gotta admire that fightin' spirit.

"Tantactus!" A bolt of lightning burst from my wand, slammed right through the Auror's hastily cast shield, and sent a few thousand volts of electricity jolting through his system. His wand flew from his hand and he clenched his teeth together, falling to his knees from the distress.

I followed up with a stunning spell before the shock stopped his heart and turned—

The ground at my feet exploded and I was hurled back through the air, spinning once and still laughing, before powering into a mighty sturdy tree. The air fled my lungs and I gasped for breath. Something tore at my side, my stitches. Damn. I was tearing those damn things daily. At this rate the stab wound would never heal. My shoulder popped, too, against the tree – pain ripped through my body – it was dislocated at best, broken at worse.

Still, pain I could manage – better than anyone.

As the dust settled I saw my attacker – it was the hot female Auror – recovered quicker than I thought. She had some skills – wasn't just a pretty face. I liked her more and more. Still, best to end this. I raised my wand against her in the blink of an eye, already casting non-verbal stunning magic.

Imagine my surprise when nothing happened.

My wand may as well have been a useless wooden stick, no different from the refuse and dry chaff lying scattered across the forest floor.

My mind reeled and a moment before terrible realisation dawned, I took a bone-breaking hex in the face, right on the nose, from the Auror. My nose cracked, blood splattered down into my mouth. I jerked back from the pain, onto my back in the dirt.

"Listen to me—"

"Shut up," the woman hissed, coming down on top of me. She pinned me to the ground with her knees against my shoulders. The pain was excruciating, maddening, but the game had changed. It was about to get a lot more real. "You are – finally – under arrest, Potter. You're lucky no one's been killed today."

"GET OFF!" I roared, squirming under her body. She had no idea, no clue, why my magic hadn't worked—

The shadow fell from above, from amongst the canopy overhead. A glint of horrific summer's light shone from the blade that cut the young Auror's head clean from her body.

There was a brief instant of clear surprise, her mouth opened in a tiny 'o' of shock, and then her head toppled forward and smacked me in the face before rolling away. Blood sprayed from the stump of her neck, coating my face and suit. Her strong, athletic body that had been holding me down went useless and limp. I pushed the dead weight aside, sickened and furious.

Tweedledum and Tweedledee, two more of the creatures Chronos had named Orc-Mare, stood grinning just out of reach. One held its blade slick with fresh blood. They looked half-human, with stretched fake skin covering leathery decayed demon flesh. The stink washing off the pair was nauseating and made my eyes water.

"Run," they said as one in a dry, raw croak. "We come for you, Time Warrior." High-pitched laughter, no saner than my own. "Break the last seal, unleash the last realm of magic one final time and allow Lord Chronos his ultimate victory."

I wanted to eviscerate these creatures. I wanted to tear them limb from bloody limb. I tried, but my magic was denied to me. They stole my spark, blocked my intent. What power did these creatures have to do that? How dare they step forward to defy me! How dare they kill an innocent woman—

I was already running.

Running away from the monsters and the madness. The forest was heating up again, the fire raging ever closer. Smoke hung thick in the air. I coughed on the acrid, hazy darkness. The true enemies were here, the ones that needed killing. Only I couldn't do it, not effectively. I needed Fleur and Tonks to help me, to distract the Orc-Mare enough that we could all get some good shots in from a distance.

The Orc-Mare did not give chase, but I was sure they followed just out of sight. My magic was denied to me as I ran hell-for-leather up the mountain. I could hear more Aurors on my heels. They would be enraged by the murder of one of their own. And who else were they chasing out here but Harry Potter, who was already suspected of killing a man? I'd be marked for death now. No more stunning or attempts to incapacitate.

As far as the Aurors were concerned, I'd signed my own death warrant in the blood of one of their own.

Oh well – let them come. It would all play out one way or another in the end.

I dashed through the trees with all the haste I could muster, heading in a direct route now up the slope to Janus's cavern. My left shoulder was a bolt of constant agony tearing through my body. I was dizzy from the pain in my nose. Still I ran, ran for the Gates of Atlantis and the Lost City beyond.

I made good time despite my injuries. I knew the quickest and most direct way, whilst the Aurors took care in their pursuit, lest I bring the forest to life once more or invoke some other traps against them. They'd been stumbling all over my concealed spellwork all morning, ranging from confundus charms to tickling spells. I liked to remain unpredictable.

I rounded a bend in the trees, which had begun to thin now as I rose towards the cavern, and had to scramble up a field of broken boulders in my path. Shrubs and scraggly trees grew in amongst the rocks, slowing my progress. The last patch was the most difficult, as I had to pull myself up a large slab of granite with just the one good arm. My left swung uselessly at my side, each jarring movement sending a constant reminder of the agony I was suppressing with adrenalin and good intentions.

At the top of the rise, a tiny armoured goblin tried to cleave my skull in two with a battleaxe.

I was so surprised that I burst out laughing, falling back over onto my ass and scrambling away from the mad little creature as he swung his razor-sharp weapon at my shins.

"Vestoclisu!" I used my wand purely on instinct and driven by need. The magic leapt to my defence, exploded from the tip in a blinding flash of crimson-tinged-purple light. It struck the maniacal goblin square in the chest, standing as he was at four-feet nothing, and fused his armour to his flesh.

The little bastard dropped his axe and screamed as the magic-infused armour it wore shrunk and morphed under the strength of my magic, my dark magic. The armour tore apart the goblin. Dark blood,

thick and syrupy, exploded from the creases in the metal. Bones snapped, flesh tore...

I stopped laughing.

The Orc-Mare must have retreated enough to loosen the shackles around my power, or I'd outrun them beneath the shielded canopy of the forest, but the goblins had finally caught up with me. There were a dozen of the bastards if there was one swearing and cursing me from the crest of the boulder field. They had wizards with them in full black battle robes. I could feel the magic about to fly.

A shadow past over the sun. I glared up at the sky through the thinning trees and caught sight of the Orc-Mare. One, two... at least half a dozen of the creatures flapping away on decayed and rotten wings. They were only twenty feet overhead. They had caught up with me. My wand failed again.

"Ah shit," I cursed, scrambling to my feet. This suit was a write-off now, scuffed and torn. I was bleeding all over it, as well. Some of the blood isn't mine, though, is it? I didn't want to think about the young woman who had bled for my arrogance.

Aurors began to appear from amongst the trees as I fled, clearing the remaining foliage at a dead run and cutting through the tree line for the cavern. If only I could've Apparated, but it would've been easier to walk to the moon in my current condition. I was going to lead everyone right to the cavern, right to the heart of my sordid little operation.

Damn it all.

Where was Dumbledore? Where was the Order? Why did no one seem to be on my fucking side?

Powdered rock and granite crunched underfoot as I dashed along the path to the cavern. The trail was easy, a steady incline that wrapped itself up and around the side of the valley I'd been battling in all day. I looked over my shoulder as I ran, sensing pursuit. The Aurors and

the goblins were sizing each other up, more than a little confused at running into one another. Still, they followed...

The Orc-Mare remained with me, circling overhead – vultures waiting to feast.

Beyond the mess of Aurors and goblins, of hitwizards and bounty hunters, the forest was ablaze. The Muggle town across the lake, and even the lake itself, was obscured by gouts of bright orange flame and clouds of thick black smoke that rose thousands of feet into the sky. The whole world was burning, or it would, if I didn't hurry up.

Tonks and Fleur were waiting for me at the mouth of the cavern, waving me on as I limped the last few metres and almost collapsed.

"No more smoking for me," I gasped, my lungs burning with exertion. The two women recoiled from me, their faces aghast.

I looked down at myself, at my dirty and bloodied suit. I was in a right state. I had no idea how damaged my face looked – it was a miracle I'd kept my glasses in one piece – but from the expressions before me I must have been damn near unrecognisable.

"It's not all my blood," I said between desperate pants. "Some of it is... my nose is broken, my shoulder—"

Tonks turned her wand on me. "Wiseleox!"

Before I could tell her that it wouldn't work, that the creatures circling overhead restricted normal magic, my nose snapped back into place with a click and a flash of pain. She'd healed me – her power was intact – but I could still feel the numbing absence of my own.

"Your magic works," I said in shock. The ball was back in my court. I thought fast and I thought sure – there was little time. "Get back in the cavern – now!"

I herded the two women back into the darkness of the cavern. As we entered I picked up a chunk of granite and began to carve into the wall, scratching rough runes into the hard stone.

"Harry, what are those creatures?"

I glanced back out into the light of day – the Orc-Mare were screeching and swooping down towards us, hell-bent on getting into the cavern before I blocked the entrance.

"No time," I said. "Tap your wand against these runes, Tonks. Light them up, and repeat after me."

"Harry, I—"

"Just do it!" I snapped. "Or we die. Good." Tonks tapped the runes and they came to life. Old World magic responding to New. "Now, slonox-slavax-sines!"

Tonks repeated the incantation and I pulled her back out of the way as the rock beneath the runes cracked.

With Fleur in the lead, we broke through the entrance to the cavern and entered the main cathedral. The brightly lit mosaic of Atlantis cast fresh light on us as we leapt down the steps. From behind, I heard the stone of the mountain entrance cracking and twisting. All at once it broke – and the entrance caved in, showering all three of us in dust and splinters of stone.

I'd bought us maybe fifteen minutes before one of the forces out there cleared away the debris.

I tripped on the last step and fell face-first into the wide plateau holding the large obsidian gates. My glasses shattered, my lip burst. I lay on the ground tasting dust and running my tongue over my teeth to make sure they were all there. A small, broken chuckle escaped me as I glared at the runes dancing on the distant corpulent walls all around me.

Warm hands tried to lift me up, turn me over. "Are you okay?" Grace Connor asked.

I grunted in pain as she heaved away at my dislocated shoulder. She rolled me onto my back and there I lay, spent for the moment. "Hi, Grace," I said. She was leaning over me. "I can see right down your blouse."

The young woman blushed and leaned back, giving me room to breathe.

"Reparo," I heard Fleur from somewhere above me. Her soft hands gently placed my glasses back onto my face. The blurry figures all around came into stark focus. "You are a mess, 'Arry."

"I've held off about fifty Aurors, more than a handful of goblins, and a swath of demon creatures from another world – what have you done with your day?"

"What you asked," Tonks said. She ran her wand over my body, assessing the damage. "Everything is ready to go. Cracks of silver light have appeared in those two pillars over there... the gates, you said." Her wand tip was drawn to my shoulder, glowing a soft shade of pink. "Dislocated, Harry."

"Can you work some of your Auror-skills on it?"

Tonks shrugged. "Bones are not my specialty. I can try but I could do more damage..."

"Not to worry." I sat up, my head still spinning from the fall, and gained my feet. "I saw this trick in a movie once."

I stumbled over to the monumental pillars, to the Gates of Atlantis. There were indeed cracks of silver light breaking through the stone. A pool of raw starlight rested in the centre of the gates, almost depleted, runes of varying colour were fading in and out all around it. I'd begun the process last night of opening the way... it needed only one final push.

Hesitating only long enough to steel my resolve, I smashed my dislocated shoulder against the unshakable pillar. I didn't get it on the first shot, but the pain made the second slam count for all – my

shoulder popped back into place. In truth, it was the Muggles who had taught me how to do that. I knew a lot of quick-fix medicine – it was how I'd stitched myself back together after Saturnia's stab wound.

"You are mad," Jason Arnair said. "Absolutely insane."

"Welcome to the jungle." I grinned. "We got fun'n'games."

A large echoing boom reverberated through the cavern from above – a blast of dust and rock exploded out from the caved-in entrance.

"What was that?" Arnair took a few hurried steps back, standing behind me next to Grace.

"It gets worse here every day," I said, humming a few lines of nonsense. "In the jungle where we play."

"Harry, are you okay?" Tonks asked.

I took a deep breath. "Fine," I said, and perhaps I lied. "There's not much time now. Prepare a defence, ladies, we're about to have company."

Good grief, but where was Albus Dumbledore?

I went to work on finishing the runes and incantations for the last round of starlight that I'd pour into the gates. Jason had transcribed the rune code perfectly, enough so I could anticipate the correct sequence of lesser and master runes, and at what intervals they needed to be drawn.

There was a trunk open just before the gates. In it lay the last sealed vase of pure starlight. In the sparsely lit cavern, the vase shone with the radiance of the heavens. I felt four pairs of eyes watching me as I worked fast, counting the minutes. More shocks and eruptions from above suggested the forces outside, probably regrouped Aurors, were almost through.

My hands were shaking after the runes were sketched, but at least I had my magic back for the time being. I severed the seal on the

starlight and poured the liquid explosive into the groove in the stone. It took on a life of its own as it pooled in the channels – the runes flared to life and the starlight disappeared under the base of the twin pillars.

I tossed aside the vase once it was empty. It rolled across the plateau and dropped over the edge into the darkness of what I was pretty sure was an endless plummet into the earth's heart. No matter.

A deep rumbling began to emanate from the obsidian pillars. The silver light peaking through the cracks deepened and spread further up towards the break of the arc forty feet overhead.

I took a step back and unscrewed the Atlantean Ring of Concealment from my finger. To all scanners and sensors, I was Harry Potter once again.

That felt good – clean.

"Here we go then," I said to no one in particular. The cavern shook with the blasting curses being fired into the entrance from above. "I'll be famous after this..." I tossed the ring into the pool of starlight. Any other metal would have dissolved straight away. This Atlantean silver sunk to the bottom – a final boost for the last push.

"Let me clean you up, 'Arry," Fleur said, placing her hand gently on my shoulder.

I shrugged her hand away, shivering in spite of myself. "I'm fine," I said. My headache was killing me. I didn't know if the blood I could taste was my own.

Fleur persisted – she always persisted. "I'm standing here worrying about you, 'Arry. Please..."

And she always worried. Right up until the moment I got her killed. I sighed... and turned away from the gates.

The enemy would be here soon enough.

There can be no turning back. It always comes back to a choice between what is right... and what is easy.

Sometimes neither choice is worth making.

Sometimes destiny is not moving towards any purpose... but away from one.

Choice cripples destiny.

I looked down at my hand. It was broken, mangled... two of my fingers were missing.

Dazed and weary, I watched the spells and the fire dance back and forth across the vast cavern. Elaborate and inventive beams of magical energy lit the mosaic of Atlantis, casting the walls in alternating shades of destructive chaos and throwing up the mismatched shadows of men, goblins, and worse...

I'd landed with my back against one of the obsidian pillars that marked the entrance to the Lost City. The pillar was shaking – cracking – and white light as pure as silver blazed through the gaps in abundance. Soon, now, soon... the way would open.

"Arry..."

There was so much noise.

So much noise and madness. I shook my head, trying to clear it all away through my relentless headache. My hand didn't hurt, which was something, I suppose. Although it was bleeding like a motherfu—

"Merde, 'Arry, you 'ave to stand!"

Someone gripped me under my arm and hauled me to my feet. Through the dirt and the grime and the smell of hot coppery magic on the air, I caught a wave of strawberries and rainfall. Blond hair, slick

and matted with blood on one side from a nasty gash across her forehead, entered my line of sight.

"Fleur..." I croaked, choking on ash. I coughed to clear my throat as my mind fell back in to place. "Where's Tonks?"

"With Arnair and Grace, protecting them from ze worst of eet. 'Arry... your poor hand."

My wand was still gripped firmly in my undamaged right hand. A small mercy that it was my left that had been maimed. No matter. What was a finger or two over the course of a lifetime? Most of the mangled flesh looked cauterised from the blast wave that had sent me ass-over-head into the pillar, but my finger-stumps were still bleeding.

"No matter," I said. From the burning in my side I guessed that my stitches must have burst, too. "No matter. We've got to move. Stay behind me and stay low."

The wide plateau that had been covered with gold and treasure five days ago was now a makeshift battlefield with half a dozen warring factions on either unnecessary side, most of them vying for my head.

A group of armoured goblins wielding fiery swords clashed with a unit of French Aurors.

More Aurors were firing spells against four of the Orc-Mare, the creatures I'd named Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and were being slaughtered. Even though their magic seemed to be operational. Why was it just me they neutered?

At the top of the cavern, the Italian forces were battling with the rogue wizards that had come with the goblin bastards. All of the forces combined against me had turned on one another.

Far overhead, more of the Orc-Mare circled, flying on their leathery decayed wings and swooping down with murderous intent, vicious swords in hand.

The only factions missing were Dumbledore's Order and the Death Eaters. I didn't expect Death Eaters at this rodeo, but not expecting the worst had bit me hard in the ass more than once. It had ended the world more than once.

And in the middle of it all, broken and bleeding, I stood watching the insanity unfold.

Insanity that had gone on long enough and set this part of the world ablaze – burning through the valley all day to this nexus of forces, to this shit storm of good intentions. It was fucking hilarious that all the people that had come to kill me were killing each other.

Fleur and I ducked behind the glowing pillars and we could feel the presence of the other world straining to break through the barrier that had kept it lost for thousands and thousands of years. It felt like a weight slamming us into the ground, it felt bigger than anything we could imagine – it felt like death, if I'm to be honest.

And I know a little about dying.

BOOM!

Something exploded. Fucked if I knew what, but a rain of shrapnel – stone and tile chips – had us ducking for cover behind the makeshift crates that held the supplies I'd been planning on crossing with into Atlantis. There'd be no time to bring them now, not if the way was opening early and the battle intensified. We were uncomfortably close to the edge of the plateau and the endless chasm that lay beyond.

Tonks was just six-feet away, crouched behind the crates with Jason Arnair and Grace Connor, a grim smile on her face. She had a few cuts and bruises of her own, and paled at the sight of my left hand.

"Hey," I said. "Everyone's trying to kill each other, so I reckon we should just sit this part out—"

A familiar and terrifying screech cut through the cavern and one of the Orc-Mare swooped down low from above, a squirming goblin in armour clutched between its talons. It took a swing at me with its

sword, eyes shining with sickly yellow light, but missed. The goblin tumbled from its grip and smacked into the stone near the edge of the plateau, ten feet away.

I thought for a moment. "Fuck this." I wasn't going to sit this part out. All of these bastards were going to die, and die hard. Someone out there owed me one left hand.

The goblin that had fallen from on high was struggling to stand and shaking itself off. All of the goblins had come dressed for war in shiny platinum armour. They looked like mini-knights of medieval England, ready to defend some tiny castle. All of them were equipped with magical swords that burnt with purple fire. Deadly and insane.

I covered the distance between the goblin and the edge of the plateau, just as the little bastard found its feet, and gave him a firm kick in the ass with the heel of my shoe.

I imagine its face looked quite surprised as it went tumbling over the edge into nothingness.

All the while I was muttering under my breath and my wand had begun to vibrate. Black fire, a fire that absorbed light and warmth, began to flow from the tip until I had a length like a bullwhip, thin and crackling.

"Stay well back," I growled at my few allies. Jason and Grace looked frightened beyond all reason, and just merely nodded at me. Fleur and Tonks met my eyes with a look of pure disbelief. Here was another lost magic brought back to life.

"Harry... is that Demon's Light?" Tonks asked.

"Ain't I just full of surprises." My broken hand was really beginning to hurt.

Outlawed by every civilised government – much like Fiendfyre – Demon's Light was a deadly and potent weapon. In many ways, it was worse than Fiendfyre. Fiendfyre could be controlled, at least.

Demon's Light was hell unleashed – dark magic at its finest. A single spark would reduce flesh to dust... and dust to nothing.

I never said I was the good guy, not by far, and I'd been pushed too far once again by all these bastards. Chronos would die, before I was through, for bringing this storm upon me. Of that I was certain.

The Demon's Light strained against my wand, fighting to break free. I could feel it getting ready to turn on me if I didn't release it, but my will was greater. Coils of black flame circled my ankles like a snake, slowly rising around my body. If I sneezed it would probably kill me.

Ah, hell, I'd been so sure I'd make it to Atlantis without this massacre. Where was Dumbledore? He should have been here. No matter now. Atlantis was aching at the bonds to be released. I was more than happy to speed that process along.

I walked out from behind the crates and into the centre of the plateau, before the shaking and shining Gates of Atlantis, wreathed in black fire and snarling at those who would dare try and stop me. Flecks of blood on my glasses gave the world a shade of crimson haze.

I couldn't kid myself here, what I was about to do was murder. It was kill or be killed, it was always kill or be killed. This was something else though. Demon's Light was something else. I was insane, I had to be. But then sanity didn't win wars – killing the greatest number of people did.

So murder it was then. I could never be the kind of hero people expected me to be. I could only be this – bathed in fire and blood.

"EVERYONE!" I roared into the maelstrom. "ALL YOU BASTARDS OUT TO KILL ME!" No one was really listening, so I cut the bullshit and unleashed the magic. "Please die..."

I screamed and urged the magic on, my wand pointed high at the arched roof of the cavern. The Demon's Light delighted in my rage and surged forward, aching at the bond and lashing back and forth against my wand.

It struck one of the Orc-Mare and the creature exploded in a gush of rotten flesh and guts. A rain of congealed blood, fried by the Demon's Light, fell in a steady dark mist as the dreaded fire moved on to the next, seeking out the targets as fast as my eyes could find them and direct the power.

"Harry, you can't use this!"

The cavern and its occupants were taking note of me now. They all remembered why they were here, who they had come for. Now they needed to flee – flee or die. I was Harry Potter. Time itself fell to her knees before me. I would not be challenged like this! NO!

"Arry, your eyes..."

My eyes were flooded with the same dark light that rippled from my wand in wave after deadly wave. The emerald green was gone, only the light of another world remained. A demonic world, a world I would breach in mere minutes.

The Demon's Light was seeking its own targets now, surging amongst the Orc-Mare and reducing their forms to so much sickening refuse... The goblins, those traitorous bastards who would cripple the world in years to come, hoarding their gold and riches, they were next. They were all next.

I was laughing again, a distant sound in my ears... only it wasn't human laughter, not anymore. It was a horrible sound, a hellish sound, a laugh like hot coals on a sizzling grill, grating my throat raw against sulphuric bedrock. The Demon's Light was taking me, and I was letting it.

Fleur shook me. I saw her from behind eyes that burnt with deadly intent. The magic was more than me, more than I could take. I felt her slap me, ordering me to stop it before it went too far.

The fire was tearing through the goblins, reducing them to crumpled mounds of shattered armour and steaming flesh. It was no more than they deserved. The rest turned to flee, as did the bounty hunters and Aurors.

Was it more than they deserved?

No. Yes. I didn't know. The light had me now – the darkness in the light. There was no turning back, no redemption, not this side of hell—

Fleur kissed me.

I felt her lips against mine, harsh and desperate. She was vicious, her tongue pushed against my teeth and she bit my lip. A surge of raw desire rushed through me, raw and human.

I teetered on the brink of succumbing to the Demon's Light, to the very reason it was outlawed and forgotten. But I couldn't – Fleur's frantic kiss sang to me of the sheer humanity in the act, of the lust. It reminded me who I was – and I was not this, I was not this demonic light.

With a cry I wrenched my wand skyward and the Light lashed back away from the fleeing Aurors and the goblins that remained. It slammed into the roof of the cavern, carved into the mosaic and ignited the runic magic that held this place together. Large swaths of stone fell away. A deafening roar engulfed the whole world.

The Demon's Light fled my eyes but not my wand. It raged against my will, threatening to escape and destroy us all. What had I been thinking? I fell to my knees, pulling Fleur down with me.

I pressed my forehead against hers. "Thank you, Fleur," I whispered. "Thank you... for stopping me."

Her smile was grim but sincere. "Someone 'as to stop you, 'Arry."

"I think this life around... only you could."

I laughed and it was my own – insane but human. Then I screamed as my wand tried to break itself in half. The Demon's Light demanded I release it. It was still carving a path of destruction through the upper

reaches of the immense cavern. I didn't know if I could extinguish it – a part of me still didn't want to. But I had that part under control.

I strained my will over the loosed flames and kept it tethered to my wand. But that was all I could do, I couldn't overcome the fetid light. It had been a long day, and I was tired, so very tired.

Darkness swam at the edge of my vision. I suddenly became aware of how lightheaded I was, how dizzy. Just how much blood had I lost?

I was ready to admit it now – I was in trouble.

There was nothing to be done. I'd tempted fate with magic I barely understood pulled from the dredges of my fractured mind. Perhaps an older Harry Potter could have pulled this off, but I'd been desperate.

I was going to die.

Maybe it wouldn't be as bad as I thought. I'd have to start the game again – these last few weeks done over. And I'd been so close, too, so close to Atlantis. In the back of my mind I knew dying would kill me – that I couldn't survive another trip back – but that thought seemed unimportant.

A beam of pure golden flame struck the lashing whip of Demon's Light and the fierce magic stopped thrashing against my wand.

It went as still as stone... and then faded away into the golden light. My eyes widened as the pressure of the dark magic disappeared. My arm fell to my side, devoid of strength. Tendrils of smoke rose from my wand in my clenched fist.

I followed the beam of golden light that had saved me – saved us all – back to its source. It had been cast from across the entirety of the cavern, from the shattered entrance high up above the plateau, from a wand of impossible strength. An elder strength.

Standing behind that wand, a glint of mischief in his old eyes, was Albus Dumbledore.

My name... my name is Potter.

Harry Potter.

Care to shake the hand that shook the world?

"Dumbledore..." I gasped.

As my old professor extinguished the Demon's Light...

The Gates of Atlantis chose that moment to open.

A wash of silver light eclipsed the cavern, followed by the beat of heavy drums. I turned from the stone steps to the gates in time to see electric blue and severe purple bolts of lightning colliding in between the gates, spinning and churning within the still air. The magic began to exert a pull on me, urging me towards the portal that was opening.

Dust and debris that littered the plateau was light enough to be pulled in too early. It disintegrated against the battling magical energies.

A deep crack split the plateau down the middle, and further slabs of heavy stone broke free from the walls and the roof. A few boulders smacked into the walkway, blasting apart in great plumes of dust and shrapnel. The stone beneath my feet was vibrating – it was going to fall into the abyss.

I waited a full three seconds, my heart in my throat, to see a kind and warm grin spread across the old man's face. Here was here to help me, to aid me. My letter had explained most of this, had explained Atlantis.

Dumbledore wasn't going to try and stop me. I could've wept with relief.

The old man blinked and said nothing. He also did nothing to stop the goblins, and the bounty hunters they had brought with them, from

slinking past him and back out of the cavern. Good riddance to a waste of time.

"Be ready," I said to Fleur, Tonks, Jason and Grace. They were all down here on the plateau, so they were all coming with me. "Levitate as many of the trunks as you can, ladies."

There came a tremendous boom and I knew, at long last, that the way had opened.

Nothing remained of the obsidian pillars; they had been dissolved into the old magic. In their place was a set of glowing white steps, steps of pure light, and at their summit nothing but a swirling mass of dark mist, impenetrable and vaguely trouble. The way had indeed opened, but wouldn't hold for long.

"Levitate the trunks into the mist," I told my companions. I cast the majority of them into the darkness with a sweep of my wand. "Now be ready – this is it."

"Be careful, Harry," Albus Dumbledore called from on high. I could barely hear him over the noise of the cavern about to tear itself apart. "Guard your heart and your mind, my dear boy."

I said nothing. All I could do was incline my head to the man I respected more than I could ever say...

And now, well, after all the long weeks and all the time travel, Atlantis awaited. Here was a chance to be great, a chance once more to change the course of the future. This time I wouldn't – couldn't – fail.

So I wanted to be great. I wanted the world to burn on my terms. I was once far too young to know the truth – that it didn't matter, and never would, but that was then.

And for all that did matter, this was now.

I was ready. I was spent and tired and beat all seven shades of shit, but I was ready.

Long live the guilty - and long live Atlantis.

I took Fleur's hand in my damaged left, and Tonks's hand in my right. Jason and Grace stood just behind, both ready to follow us into the abyss. The remaining Aurors attacked just as we ran, and spells rained down upon us even as they fled the cavern. We ran as one, as outlaws in truth now, as friends questing for the last great adventure this side of death...

Desperation... had always driven me to dangerous new heights. To unlawful time-travel and beyond...

I had just pierced the veil between one world and the next, and nothing would ever be the same.

Darkness surrounded me, surrounded us all, and it was cold, so very cold, as we blinked out of existence.

A/N: One long mo'fo of a chapter, aye. What d'you think, folks? Did Harry get the shit kicked out of him or what? Despite it all, he made it, he's on his way, but what will Atlantis bring him? How will it be different to what he remembers? Just what does he remember?

Heh, this was a real pain in the ass to write, so tell me what you think in a review – let's try and break 1,000 of 'em.

All the best, talk again soon,

Joe

Interlude – A Clock On the Face of Hell

Deserve victory.

~~Goodkind

"Can I help you?"

The silence was oppressive, the motes of sunlight dusting the stacks of books threatened to tip the haphazard piles, but there was an air about the place that suggested those books had leaned on the edge of the desk for years, and weren't about to be disturbed now. I felt out of place – young and immature before so much compiled knowledge.

"Son, are you listening? What do you want?"

What did I want? That was a good question. I wanted answers, by hook or by crook, and I'd get them. "My name is... Harry," I said.

"Harry?"

"Just Harry."

This is my story, and I hear the cry of a terrible power...

"Can I help you?"

The silence was oppressive, the motes of sunlight dusting the stacks of books threatened to tip the haphazard piles, but there was an air about the place that suggested those books had leaned on the edge of the desk for years, and weren't about to be disturbed now. I felt out of place – a little wiser than the last time I was here.

"Son, are you listening? What do you want?"

What did I want? That was an okay question. I wanted to undo the damage, by hook or by crook, and I wanted another chance. "My name is... Harry," I said.

"Harry?"

"Just Harry. You were wrong, Professor Finn, it could be done."

But perhaps it shouldn't have been done...

"Can I help you?"

The silence was oppressive, the motes of sunlight dusting the stacks of books threatened to tip the haphazard piles, but there was an air about the place that suggested those books had leaned on the edge of the desk for years, and weren't about to be disturbed now. I felt out of place – a madman loosed upon the world.

"Son, are you listening? What do you want?"

What did I want? That was a terrible question. I wanted to unmake the world, by hook or by crook, and I wanted to tear my soul asunder yet again. "My name is... Harry," I said.

"Harry?"

I laughed hysterically. "You know me, sir, you do. I am the unfailing time traveller. I am the tricky wizard of forever! You were right, Professor Finn, it all ended in paradox."

Paradox... contradiction... cannot exist in reality. Not in part, not in whole, not by crook nor by hook.

Walking down the old paths of Faé and Forget, I felt the breeze warm at my back, urging me on along this foolish yet fucking necessary quest.

A quest for an idea, a quest for a terrible fate.

The forest was light surrounded by oppressive darkness. The last bastion of magical purity on the planet, a ward of broken realms and

swaying promises. Soft petals of sparkling light cast the green trees, thick on all sides, into blurs of electric-blue amnesty.

"Let me take you down," I hummed the words softly against the light, "Let me take you down, 'cause I'm going to Strawberry Fields..."

Any other day and I would have been terrified; I would have been clawing at my eyes and on my knees before the weight of the magical world that was pressing down all around me. But this wasn't any other day. This was the last day of my life.

There was a clock on the face of Hell, of that I was quite sure.

The path through the forest meandered back and forth, across fallen stumps and over moss-covered boulders, yet it cut west – forever west – through the debris. I saw nothing living save the trees, and yet I felt watched.

This path had started in the Forbidden Forest, on the Hogwarts side, and I had travelled for the best part of a day through that wood, my wand clutched tightly in my fist, spelling trouble more than a few times, and yet I was no longer in the Forbidden Forest. This forest, these trees, wasn't exactly anywhere.

I'd left the whole world behind, what was left of it.

"Nothing is real and nothing to get hung about." The oppressive silence devoured my mumbled song, yet I had to make some noise. I had to rage against the darkness. "Strawberry Fields Forever."

In time I came to a clearing in the trees, and yet a thick canopy still arched high overhead and cut deep into an enormous slab of stone that rose up and out of sight into the azure sky. In the clearing was a dark pool, fed from a heavy waterfall that cascaded down over the worn slab of stone. Where the waterfall struck the pool a radiant, foamy swash shot up sparks of pure silver light.

This was the place. I felt it in my bones – in my heart and my mind.

I was thirsty. Don't drink the water. But to drink or eat in this... place... was death. Was worse than death. Was forever-death, can ya dig it?

Still, I'd have to go swimming to get this all done and dusted.

I was dressed in a pair of old Hogwarts robes over a shirt and jeans. I'd been going for the 'wizardly' appearance, but that now felt foolish. I shrugged out of the robes, pulled off my shirt and unlaced my boots before losing the jeans, as well.

In short manner, I stood naked before the secluded forest pool – save for my glasses and my wand, clutched in a death-grip in my right hand.

It was time.

And yet I hesitated. Of course I hesitated.

It would be an easy step down into the pool to begin my work, my dark and tricky work, yet I paused for a moment to take in my shimmering reflection in the water. Even in the twilight, my reflection showed the mess of scars and twisted fused skin that covered my body, burning over my shoulders and clawing at my neck. It had been a hard war, a desperate race for Atlantis... I was ruined.

And about to be as ruined as Voldemort.

I stepped off the edge of the path and into the pool. The water was warm, welcoming, like an embrace, and for a moment I felt like I was floating. The mud beneath my feet was as soft as silk... I was terrified.

"Fuck that," I whispered. "Fuck the fear." I gathered my will and waded out into the deep water, up to my knees, wand at the ready...

The forest was silent save for the cascading curtain of water before me. It was time to get down to business.

Like any good magic worth a damn, this summoning required blood fresh from the vein. I muttered a quick spell and a razor-sharp point of

silver grew out of my wand tip. Without any preamble, I drew the tip across my free wrist and slashed it open. Blood, hot and brilliant-crimson, spurted from the wound, down my hand, and began to drip into the water.

I turned and tossed my wand back onto the bank amongst my clothes. I wouldn't need it again, the voices in my head whispered. Voices I'd come to trust and yet understood as the jagged hooks of insanity.

I sensed its presence gathering before I saw it. The water around me began to churn, like the tide of the sea, drawing my oh-so-precious blood down into its dark, impenetrable depths. I was convinced coming here had been the right decision, but still...

From within the waterfall I caught it's eyes staring at me. Twin sparks of soft purple light. There was a soft giggle, feminine and striking, as the spirit of the past surged forward through the water and came to rest before me.

"Hello, Harry Potter."

I took a step back in spite of myself. The creature before me was beautiful, shapely and curved, and as naked as I was. Her form consisted of nothing more than sparkling silver water and those deep, distinctive purple eyes. She was a creature of Faé times, of the Old World... not even close to human.

And yet her form was beautiful... beautiful and complete. Her liquid-figure looked human, looked like a woman. A fall of flowing water clung to her face on either side, a drop of clear hair, resting on her shoulders. My eyes glanced down to her chest, to her breasts and the suggestive flow of nipples.

I took a deep breath.

"Hello..."

"It has been an age of ages since one so young and so mortal sought the company of one such as me..." Her voice was smooth, seductive... "I know why you are here."

"Really?" I doubted that. No one had ever dared to do what I had planned.

"Of course," the spirit said, gliding around me on the surface of the pool. "You are here for them. For the lost. For... Fleur Delacour, for Nymphadora Tonks, and Albus Dumbledore. You are here for Hermione Granger, you are here for Ronald Weasley. So many ghosts haunt you, Harry, so many corpses paved your path through my forest..."

"The world is burning."

"No, it has burnt, and you seek to undo it. You seek to unmake the Infernal Clock. Such a task of inspired madness!"

Well, I guess she did know what I had planned. Despite the shields that guarded my mind, this creature could see right through me. I was still bleeding into the water... "What I want—"

"Is not what you need. I can give you what you need." Her watery smile, her full lips shot with the silver sparks from the waterfall, promised pleasures I could only imagine.

I let out a deep breath slowly. "And what is it you think I need?"

"Time."

That one word echoed throughout the forest, breaking through the veneer of unnatural silence. Behind me and all around the trees groaned, swayed... a smile crept onto my face.

"We're on the same page, you and I."

"To challenge the universe, Mr. Potter, as you have done, as you will do for a very long time to come, is the most reckless, foolish... and heroic undertaking in the long life of your world."

"I'm no hero—"

"Thrice damn your modesty, Harry. You are the last hero. You echo back and forth across time and the ripples of what you have done – and what you will do – are legend."

I didn't care for that, not at all. "Legend...?"

"Legends of defying chaos and entropy – of resisting the inevitable march toward nothing."

I shook my head. "Are you speaking in riddles?" I hated riddles. "Speak clear, as the Atlantis Proclamations command your kind. I invoke the Treaty."

The spirit, the demon, the shade-creature before me swirled back under the curtain of falling diamonds and became indistinct against the rush of the waterfall. She laughed at me – a cruel, cunning laugh born of my ignorance. "Your Lord Voldemort broke that truce when he seized the Lost City."

"I claim the truce unbroken – Voldemort does not speak for mankind and the Wizarding World. I do."

The spirit flowed forward again, sparks of silver light coursing through her watery form. It flowed forward, close enough to where I stood up to my knees in the pool that I feared attack.

"That," the spirit said. "That... is what I hoped to hear."

I sighed. "Thought you might..."

"Then you accept the mantle of Champion?"

There was no reason to hesitate. No reason not to sell my soul and damn the consequences. I was going to die, of that I was quite sure, and soon. But it would be worse to live. "I must. It's time."

The spirit shook her head and one clear arm of sparkling water came up to rest on my shoulder. Her touch sent ripples of raw pleasure, hot and sure, through my body. I felt myself growing hard...

"You must stop thinking of time as a straight line, as a perspective of cause and effect. Time, for you, Harry, is no longer... forward."

I shrugged. Strawberry Fields Forever. "I'll try."

"Yes, you will." A heavy, pregnant pause. "And the universe will break you for it."

"Oh let that bastard do its worst..." I was beginning to feel light headed. I'd lost a lot of blood. "Just name your price, lady..."

Her smile was sweet, if such a thing was possible, and her hand on my shoulder moved down my chest, over the crisscrossing scar tissue, across my stomach and lower until she held the length of me in her soft, clear grip.

"You seem more than... willing... to pay my price."

I almost smiled. "Well, so be it."

Somehow we'll make it.

Because that's what we do.

A/N: Well, there we go. A glimpse of how Harry did it, how he accomplished his damned fate. He had to screw a spirit-whore of silver sparkling water as he bled to death. And that wasn't even the full price. Heh... heh. Thanks for reading, folks, please review.

No real ETA on the next chapter, but I will get this story done – that's a promise.

Thanks again. All the best,

Joe

Chapter 20 – Strawberry Fields

I've had the chance to be insane...
asylum from the falling rain.

-Chili Peppers

With Tonks' hand in my right and Fleur's in my left, we stepped forward to brush the sparkling curtain of mist. And nothing much happened, save the roof of the crumbling cavern began to fade away, the cathedral domes overhead became a wash of bruised purple sky, roiling with clouds of devastating potential, and we left the world behind...

Then it began to hurt.

Of course it did.

Nothing this important could ever be gained easily, or without enough blood spilt to dye the Pacific bright red.

A thousand knives of red-hot iron pierced my skin, my eyes rolled and boiled in their sockets and a shower of molten, hissing lead drowned all thought, all sense save for the maddening, endless pain. The Cruciatus curse on overdrive, kicked into third gear already doing a hundred miles an hour...

YEEHAW!

I rode that wave of pain across the space between worlds, rode that motherfucker down through the moments between seconds, and over the impossible gap in forever. It was always, always one helluva ride.

The cavern, the mosaic, the rain of spells, and Dumbledore disappeared and in their place was a between space of old magic and a pathway of forgotten light. The road to Atlantis, the speckled road to forever suspended on silver wings.

There were memories on that road. Scarred memories of the future's past.

"What do you think the kids will remember of the war? The first-years and younger?" I held my head in my hands, fighting a headache – a migraine of epic proportions.

"Grim-faced Aurors patrolling the castle? The threat of attack, the sense that something's wrong with the world..." A pause. "And they'll remember you, of course, they'll remember Harry Potter. The Chosen One – the light against the dark. You'll be legend, Harry."

"No, they'll not remember it that way," Neville Longbottom said, drawing deep on a warm, comforting cigar. It looked out of place in his grim, blood-stained hands. "They'll remember Honeydukes going out of business... they'll remember Quidditch being cancelled." He paused. "Aye, but I suppose they'll remember you, Harry. You're the hero."

"Perhaps that's the best way to remember it," Tonks said. "Better than the mass graves, the killing fields, the cost to the Muggles..."

Something was rising out of the pain, out of the sparkling darkness. It was something I'd fought so hard to see, something I'd set the world ablaze for... what was that old line? The one full of hopelessness, full of regret and bitter angst at my existence? Oh yeah...

The odds are long, life's unfair and death's no better.

But you know what?

Fuck the odds.

You fuck the odds because looking back and counting the cost is worse than looking forward and seeing how far is left to go, seeing how much has been lost and how much is left to give. Blood, sweat, and tears – that's all I got, boss – but it won't be enough.

The sky is grey, the always-grey of Europe, but it is a different grey today – a smoky grey that rises on prejudice, that saw the souls of six million not too long ago, that sees the souls of so much more now. Death and all his friends are busy... far too busy.

Even that scythe-wielding bastard must be tired, I thought, gazing out over the fields of smouldering corpses. Here lay the Muggles of ol' London Town. Here lay the remains of so much hate and anger and violence, borne on the wings of power and control. Here lay chaos, and here there were monsters.

The year was 2000, the day was endless. Of course it was. Voldemort's furnaces were screaming today. And the Chosen One, the light against the dark... I was nothing against that fury. Nothing save a reminder of what could have been, of the before, and the not-quite-ready, can ya dig it?

Fleur's grip was strong and Tonks' was even tighter as the maelstrom abated, as the pain bled away on the falling rain. Slowly, but ever so surely, the world reasserted itself. Only it wasn't the same world. The pain had been so bad that the reward had to be good. And here we were now, after the long weeks, here we were...

The sky was azure diamonds.

The sky was aflame. Memory had brought me here, brought me to the edge of an unforgiving, relentless war. I wasn't ready.

How could I ever be ready?

I had to be ready.

"VOLDEMORT!"

Echoed the cry across the long... the desolate... the wastelands of time.

And why?

"Because 'Arry Potter is worth ze monsters," Fleur said.

Maybe yes and maybe no...?

Despite it all, my headache was fading... not disappearing, no, that was too much to hope for. But fading... I could breathe, breathe and feel. My ruined hand was ablaze, my joints ached with the strain. I'd been kicking ass and taking names all day, and the cost was brutal.

There was a great shock and roar and an unexpected thump into the ground.

"Arry..."

The sky was still diamonds. Azure, twinkling diamonds under an inferno of soft purple menace. I felt uneasy. I felt out of sorts. I felt like death warmed up.

"I'm here."

But I wasn't there, I wasn't... I was still floating on memory, in the worlds of better-left-forgotten...

And it's like a drug, when all's said and done. We become the demons we fight, because the furnaces scream beneath the fields and no one listens, no one cares...

Hogwarts to ruin, as all things must, and the world do-teeter forever, boss, on the brink of complete annihilation and promised, desperate salvation. Salvation I bear on the back of a broken, torn soul and a nightmare I cannot destroy.

Be prepared to die.

If you want to live, and if you want to make a difference – God help you if you do, God help you if you can – then be prepared to die.

And be prepared to drag the screaming innocence of humanity down into hell with you. Mercy be done – maybe yes, maybe no.

And no matter how hard it gets, how fucking impossible, always – always – tell yourself that you can do it, that you'll make it. Even if you know the taste of that bullshit well, you never admit defeat.

I can think of no better advice than that.

Save run and hide, and try not to fall asleep, lest the nightmares of the waking world happen upon you and, with a grumbling stomach, show you what it means to be a 'hero' and how so few moments matter at your last.

Was I prepared to die?

Maybe yes, maybe no – but you know the answer, don't you? Of course I wasn't, and that is why I force Time to my own dark ends, time and time again.

"Time's up, Harry."

I laughed. "Oh, Time is never up."

"You ran a fair race, boy – from Godric's Hollow to my father's gravestone, from the shores of Atlantis to the ruins of Hogwarts. No one can fault your resolve, your will, at the end." A heavy pause. "Despite my best efforts, you will be remembered as the greatest threat to my power."

I gazed unblinking into the crimson eyes of Lord Voldemort – my nemesis, my equal – and laughed again. It was laugh or scream. That's what it always comes down to in the end; the right kind of insanity. Overhead, a sharp bolt of clear blue lightning sizzled through the clouds, cutting my abrupt laughter short with a clap of thunder. "Maybe yes... maybe no. There's not many left to remember this time. You win this round, Voldemort."

"Well, you and I both know there was never any doubt as to who would emerge triumphant."

"I've not given up yet, you know," I replied, almost conversationally, as if over drinks. I guess I might have sounded a little regretful.

"You are dead, Harry – the race is run. It is futile to resist now. There is no one left to die in your place."

I had fallen against a steel bracket supporting the remains of the Ministry. It was cold and it was dark, and I was alone. Thick railroad spikes of rusted iron were punched through the flesh of my wrists, and two more through the meat of my thighs. I was literally nailed to a cross. It would be rather symbolic if there was anyone left alive to appreciate that crap.

"I guess I'll see you in another life then..." I whispered.

I pulled myself from the memories, from the wastelands of time, and forced the searing pain back where it belonged – in the nothingness between this world and the last. It wasn't an easy task, but it was a task I was well-versed in.

I don't know how much time had slipped by, but I managed to sit up. To sit up and survey the world around me. It must have only been a few moments, because Tonks and Fleur were doing the same. Tonks still held my hand in a death-grip, her knuckles white. Jason and Grace were not far away, strewn amongst the supply trunks.

"Now that hurt," Tonks said, gritting her teeth. "Harry, where are we? Is this...?"

And of course it was. As I'd already noted, the sky was twilight diamonds cast across a purple sea. The ground was soft beneath us, spongy like moss. We were on a hillside. Halfway up a trepid rise that stretched away into the sky for what must have been miles. From our vantage point, we held a commanding view...

And that view held the most terrific, the most deadly, the most awe-inspiring range of mountains ever conceived. The twisted peaks were covered in electric-blue snow, cast from the sight far below, yet the range extended for miles and miles up toward the heavens. The peaks brushed the sky, and I wouldn't have been surprised if they pierced the upper reaches of the atmosphere.

Great crags of overhanging rock and cliff faces a dozen miles high played tricks with the eye, creating a sense of size so numbing that it couldn't be properly seen. And that was just the boundaries of this new world...

Down and away to the right, just past Atlantis itself, miles upon miles of black rock and twisted thrusts of reef, marred with burnt coral, brushed up against the Lost City. It was the coastline, and there should have been an ocean beyond it... but that ocean had long since dried up, leaving behind a terrifying, lifeless wasteland. The sight of it made me feel sick...

I turned away.

Behind us all rose two twisted pillars of dark obsidian stone. Dead and lifeless now, the Gates of Atlantis had done their task... and the Lost City sat far below, surrounded by natural barriers of impenetrable rock and a dead ocean. A haze of indigo light merged with neon-blue ensconced over the spires and outlandish architecture below.

"Merde..." Fleur whispered. "Eet looks so small, and yet..."

"It's huge," I assured her, and despite my bruised and bleeding condition, I managed a wink. "We're just far away... ten miles at least."

And we were. Despite the uninterrupted view we had into the valley below, the commanding view of Atlantis aglow in the evening, we were still miles up above the lost city. Halfway up a mountain that touched the stars. Far below, in warmer climes, towers that rivalled the highest skyscrapers back home, and towers that eclipsed such modern heights, looked like pinpricks spun across an impossible map.

"What do you feel right now?" I asked the group at large, and then laughed. "We've just escaped one world and now... behold another! What do you feel?"

"Afraid," Arnair said, and that was enough for everyone. Fear.

Below lay the unknown, the better-left-forgotten, and we were so small against the backdrop of this impossible place. But there wasn't just fear. No, not at all – there was wonder, astonishment, and all

manner of conflicting emotions as the goal of not just one lifetime, but more than I could recall, came into sight...

Yet above all there was pain. The pain of remembrance, oh goddamn it, and the pain of existence. I raised a bloodied and broken hand to my forehead.

That scar – my scar – my infamous lightning-bolt scar, was burning...

There's no quick fix for these dirty tricks.

And that one, ladies and gentlemen, was free.

"Dumbledore really came through for us, didn't he?" I asked the group as we gathered our supplies. Half the trunks had tumbled down the hillside a few hundred feet from the impact of our travels, but everything – and everyone – seemed to be in one piece. Except me. I was short a few fingers.

"Why didn't he stop you?" Tonks asked. "Even now, with that city down there staring me in the face, even now this is all still insane."

"Arry, you are bleeding terribly."

Fleur hadn't left my side, neither had Tonks, and Jason and Grace remained close, almost huddled together. I could see Jason's mind taking it all in, processing the whole damn world around us. He'd be just fine. Grace looked like she was about to throw up. It felt strange to have her along this time.

I held up my left hand and gazed at the broken and missing fingers, at my fresh oozing stumps and sighed. "This was worth a few fingers, don't you think?"

"No," Tonks said. "Here, let me, Harry... does it hurt?" She tapped my hand with her wand.

I shook my head and told the truth anyway. "Yeah it stings like a motherfu—"

"A few broken bones – shattered bones – and the missing digits, of course." Tonks shook her head. "I can stop the bleeding. The bones will have to mend with some of those potions in one of the trunks... there's nothing I can do for the fingers."

I shrugged and dropped her a wink. "No matter." My eyes were drawn away from the people around me and down again to Atlantis. It looked so peaceful in the strange afterglow of the perpetual twilight around us, bathing the world in shades of purple and blue... I had a thought. "Quite ironic really, isn't it?"

"What is?" Jason asked.

I held up both my hands to the group. The full one and the maimed one. "Now I've got a big hand and a little hand... just like a clock." I snorted a laugh. "An infernal clock..."

It was as good few minutes before I could stop giggling at my own stunning wit. It had been a long few weeks getting to this point, and the sight of the city below lifted my mood more than any amount of stolen kisses from Fleur.

Well... maybe yes and maybe no to that.

The increased burning in my scar, coupled with the resurgence of that damnable headache, brought reality – this new and shiny reality – crashing back down upon my shoulders. We were still ten miles out from the city, but we were also extremely exposed on this cresting hillside.

"Come on," I said. "We need to head down and find somewhere to set up a base of operations..." That sounded like I knew what I was doing. Good.

I was still playing the first-time-here card, but I knew exactly where I was going. The Shipyards. The massive docks of Atlantis, where we could hide from Voldemort and his Death Eaters right in the heart of

the city... I'd done it before. There was even weapons there, along with basic facilities that I could get up and running with a bit of spellwork. Thinking of what I could recall from previous lives, previous crimes, I felt a little intimidated at all the work that still had to be done.

"Getting here was the easy part," I said. It had been anything but this time, yet in a few days, the next few weeks and months, all of the effort expended in getting to the Lost City – the Found City – would seem like a drop in the ocean weighed against what trials lay ahead.

The least of all would be tearing a hole back to the proper world before September 1st and preventing the annihilation of Hogwarts.

But these were thoughts for later, after we were off this mountain and safely hidden within the wonderland below. A wonderland full of ancient, deadly magic, a hibernating demonic army, and more than a few dark wizards.

We began to move out, and as we did it began to snow – the heavens opened up and a rain of pure silver flakes, sparkling and warm, followed us down the mountainside.

You're in my arms, sweetheart, but you're not breathing...

A river of raw magic, bleeding over cliffs ten miles high, barred our path as we descended towards Atlantis.

It was a quiet place, this whole world – something my presence would soon change – and it was still hard for me to get my head around the fact that we'd left the rest of the world, everything and everyone, behind. I wondered what had become of Chronos and Saturnia – had they somehow followed? I had to assume they had, and act accordingly.

But for now, even as tired and as beaten as I was, there was time to rest. A few scant hours where no one needed killing, where there were no puzzles to solve or lost treasures to find. For a few scant hours there was just a trek down a mountainside towards a fairytale.

"What iz zat?" Fleur asked of the river streaming away to our right. We were so high up that the air was a struggle to breathe. It should have been cold, but the blizzard of falling snow-sparks was, if anything, warm. Behind us I levitated the trunks in a neat little pile.

"Raw magic," I said. About six feet wide and riddled with offshoots and tributaries, all of them pooling towards the sheer drop nearby, the magic flowed like water speckled with quicksilver. A heavy heat rose from the river, a comforting heat. "That's magic untapped, a vein of the stuff that makes the world – and the universe – keep spinning."

"You're kidding," Tonks said. "How could you know that, Harry? There's nothing like this back... back home."

"No..." I paused. "At least none that's easy to reach... and for good reason. An open vein like this is trouble, danger. One wrong spell and the whole thing goes boom." That was an understatement. "How do you think Atlantis was blasted into this world in the first place?"

"This is what sunk the Lost City?" Grace asked, clinging to Arnair. "I don't understand."

"Me neither," and that was half-true, "just steer clear of it whenever we come across it. Where it gathers... strange things can happen."

"What do you mean?"

I shrugged—"Thrice damn your modesty, Harry. You are the last hero. You echo back and forth across time and the ripples of what you have done – and what you will do – are legend."—and memory burnt through the headache again—The spirit shook her head and one clear arm of sparkling water came up to rest on my shoulder. Her touch sent ripples of raw pleasure, hot and sure, through my body. I felt myself growing hard...—but I forced it away.

"Harry, what do you mean?" Tonks was insistent.

"It's magic," I said. "It's alive... it can be sentient. Don't treat it lightly, is all."

So we skirted the river and headed down what was clearly an old path, cobbled with broken stone and overgrown with mossy weeds. Atlantis drew ever closer now, and the whole thing began to seem that much more real.

The city's foreign architecture and ancient design came into relief against the backdrop of the darkening sky. It looked beyond it's time, that much was for certain. It looked like it could've been an alien world, and I suppose in a way it was. It was futuristic, yet most of it was in utter ruin...

The lights were on, though, so someone was home...

Towers scraped the sky, glass domes extended over stadium-sized fields, and walkways stretched from the peak of one building to the next – bridges built in the air over the city. Neon-blue lighting ran up and down the streets and throughout hundreds of the buildings. That was normal, though, and it came from the conduit of magic running beneath the city. A near-eternal source of energy powering devices and keeping the city running even after its defeat.

One tower rose above all others in the heart of the city. And it shone like a beacon in the darkness. It was a dark spire of the same obsidian stone as the gates had been, and it was huge. Even at this distance, I could see the unnatural smoothness of the rock, the polished finish and metal trim. Blue lights ran up the tower in a spiral and at the very top, still far below us, a single white sphere of fire ignited a flat plateau.

"What are you staring at, 'Arry?" Fleur asked. Some of the sense of adventure had left her voice. She was afraid. They all were.

"Voldemort's in there," I said, eliciting a sting of pain in my scar. Thoughts were dangerous things. "In that big tower with the white light up top."

I saw Tonks shiver. "He's that close...?"

I nodded. "We're going to avoid him and the Death Eaters for as long as we can." I took a deep breath. "But eventually we'll face him here, ladies – and Jason – and when we do you can't hesitate, okay." I chuckled and rested a hand on Tonks' shoulder. "No one would grudge you a Killing Curse if it blasts that son of a bitch back into the ether, Tonks."

"A... killing curse," Jason said, taking off his glasses to clean them on the scruff of his shirt. "Don't have to think too hard about that one."

"Why didn't Dumbledore stop you, Harry?" Tonks asked, not so much changing the subject as trying to understand.

"Stop me?" I grinned. "He would have joined me if he could, Tonks. Come on, we'll walk and talk."

The soft, falling flakes of light began to thin as we trekked down towards the city. The path had become easier, wider. Almost to grazing land and the beginnings of the city itself. Giant aqueducts, as ruined as the ones we had left behind in Italy, were cut into the rock away to our left. Once again, there was a sense that this whole damn thing was too big for me – for anyone. But I was all the world had – Fate damns the innocent, can ya dig it? – and this time I would have to be enough...

"Professor Dumbledore iz a great wizard," Fleur said, explaining for Jason and Grace's benefit. "Perhaps the most powerful wizard in ze world, and certainly the most influential. He is Headmaster of Hogwarts, an old school zat teaches our craft to young witches and wizards. 'Arry iz a student there."

I couldn't help a short, humourless laugh. I hadn't been a student in a long, long time. Lifetimes, of course. "That I am," I agreed for the sake of it. "I told Dumbledore of Atlantis, Tonks, in the letter I sent him. I told him Voldemort was here, that he had found a way through the veil – just as we did – and that I couldn't let him have the power and the city uncontested."

Tonks had a think about that. "He thinks you're a match for He-Who—for Voldemort?"

This time my smile was genuine, almost enough to make me forget the various flares of pain surging through me. "He thinks too much of me, but in this regard, at least, I am the Chosen One." I grimaced at the title. "To him, the risk is worth it, Tonks... but there are things he can't abandon back home. A quest of his own for pieces of Voldemort's soul. I'll do my part here and Dumbledore will do his part, too."

"Still, you could die, Harry."

I shrugged. "This is war – a war for the whole, wide world. And the bastard killed my parents; his followers killed Sirius, Cedric... how many dead can you name?" A rush of bitter, frustrated anger took me. "They tried to kill Fleur not two weeks ago, they will kill so many more if they're not stopped."

Worlds more – and all the vacant dreams within.

"Albus Dumbledore knows that better than most – he's lived through two world wars, fought and defeated more than a few Dark Lords and would-be Dark Lords." I had nothing, nothing, but respect for the old man. An old man coming to the end of his long, painful life. Less than a year to go. "He's seen civilisation come crashing down before, he's seen our little island fight back a war machine that killed over forty million under Hitler and Grindelwald."

"Grindelwald?" Grace asked.

"So you wonder why Dumbledore would risk my life against Voldemort, Tonks? Why he would let a fifteen-nearly-sixteen year old schoolboy hurl himself headfirst into a maelstrom of war to seize a lost power and defy a near-immortal mass-murderer?" I had wondered that myself a long time ago.

I had long since found my answer, as had Dumbledore sixty years past. "Because he knows, he knows, that the only response we can show Voldemort is to crush him and all that he stands for. All the prejudice, all the hate, all the thirst for power – Dumbledore would throw a schoolboy against that every damn time."

"You make him sound awful," Grace said, hugging her stomach against the world.

I thought of all I knew of Dumbledore. All he had sacrificed over his life. The tragedy of his family, the loss of his sister, Ariana, and his own battles against the desire for power. Even his feelings for Gellert Grindelwald and how that turned out. He was the greatest man I would ever know, but goddamn this world for breaking him, breaking us both, goddamn it straight to the hell I was trying to save it from.

I shook my head. Dumbledore awful? "Perhaps, Grace, but I love him for it."

It's not my time... but it soon will be.

From a distance of ten miles the city had looked mostly whole save for a few patches of ruin and rubble. As we walked the streets of Atlantis itself, the calamity and chaos that had claimed this fabled utopia became all too clear. The Found City was a ruin in and of itself, beyond all redemption.

Heh – much like my good self.

There was not a building unmarked, burnt or gouged by impossible powers lost so long ago. Dust lay inches thick along the roads and walkways. Rubble and chunks of weather-worn stone lay within the dust, silent and accusing, covered in a thin layer of struggling, brown moss. Decaying husks of various metallic machines lay rotting wherever they had fallen. Shells of what could've been something akin to cars littered the roads.

There were no bones.

The bones were the dust we waded through. The lost lives of millions in one, terrible night.

Yet the lights still worked, for the most part, and even in ruin the city was a wonder.

"My god," Jason Arnair exclaimed once again. "Look at this, the architecture and the sound engineering. Ten-thousand years ago and they were way ahead of... of us."

"Humbling, isn't it?" I said, keeping my eyes peeled for any unpleasant surprises. Atlantis was a ghost town, after all, and there were always things hiding in the dark of the better-left-forgotten.

"Yes, yes it is, Mr. Potter." The young scholar knelt down to pick up a scrap of rusted metal out of the dust. "What is this? I don't recognise the colour..."

I glanced at the piece and tapped on the side of the broken building closest to us. The sky was dim twilight overhead now, about as dark as it got here, and there were no stars. "It's a piece of iridium, Jason. The Atlanteans used it to reinforce the city. Cooked right into the stone and mixed with other elements to withstand even the strongest attack."

"Iridium," the man whispered. "No, it can't be. I mean sure, iridium is strong – high-melting point, very hard and silvery-white. The second densest element on Earth, actually, after osmium. You say it's mixed with something else? How could that be?" Jason paused and fell out of the encyclopaedia in his head. "With... magic?"

I nodded. "It's mixed with an element no longer found back home." There was an abundance of it here, however. "Mythril."

"You're kidding," Grace said, with a hint of bitter sarcasm. She wasn't taking any of this well. "I thought that could only be found in the Mines of Moria."

I grinned. "And there's your pop-culture reference, folks. No, Grace, 'all that is gold does not glitter', this is the real thing."

"If eet was so strong," Fleur said. "Then what tore down 'alf of these buildings?"

I had to chuckle into the dead air. "You know what," I said. "Chronos... somehow... unleashed one at your home just last week. The Shambling Bone-Men, Fleur." Dumbledore and I had fought one beneath Rome in the Magnus Fontis. "Demons, true demons, of the Old World."

"Merlin," Tonks breathed. "They're not still around here, are they?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "We're here to stop Voldemort unleashing them upon the world – unleashing them by the millions." I watched the world burn more than once to these creatures. As always, the memories hurt. "Now let's keep moving. There'll be plenty of things to study once we get where we're going, Jason."

The Muggle professor placed the piece of mythril-iridium carefully into the cargo bag he wore over his shoulder. "I don't doubt it."

"How do you know where we're going, 'Arry?" Fleur asked.

Because I've been here before. "A hunch," I said, tapping my scar with the remains of my left hand. "Voldemort's been here for weeks. I've... I've seen a few things through our oh-so-special link."

Fleur held my eyes for a moment and then sighed. "Very well."

She didn't believe me. Was I that obvious? Or did I just not care about appearances anymore? This being my last chance, and all, perhaps a part of me... a small, stupid part... wanted everyone to know the relentless sacrifices I had made to save the world. To save the whole damn world.

I guess I was as selfish as the next man.

We moved on through the empty, dusty streets, under the glow of ancient lights and with the weight of a dead city closing in all around us. Soon enough towers of near-inconceivable height towered over us, eclipsing the faded sky in false shadow and adding an air of eerie chaos to the whole mix of things.

It was getting a little cold.

"What time is it?" Grace asked, staring up at the sky. "There are no stars..."

I checked that clock in my head, the one that kept perfect count of the seconds... and found nothing. I had to glance at my watch, as scratched and scuffed as it was, to remember the time. Or rather the way time worked here.

I watched the second hand slowly ticking backwards, as the minute hand turned a minute on every second. It wasn't broken, I knew, it was just adjusting.

"There's no real way to measure time here," I said. "We're too close to the Infernal Clock."

"The what?"

"The last Key to the Past..." And of that I would say no more, Fleur already suspected too much, but it had a rather large part to play before all was said and done here in Atlantis.

The city was over seven miles wide right through its heart, yet I still gave the High Tower in the centre a lot of breathing room, less the Dark Lord sense my presence. He had never found me before I wanted to be found, but things were different this time. For all I knew he and Chronos could be up there right now, laughing it up together and plotting my downfall...

I was paranoid, of course I was, but the reality was that they were out to get me. It wasn't all in my head.

I was beginning to tire, to really feel the day, when we were still four miles out from where I wanted to be. Dizzy spells kept me concentrating really hard on one foot in front of the other. My head and my hand were killing me. It was really cold now, as well, and everyone had fallen silent. Tonks cast a few heating charms but even that didn't take the bite out of the wind.

"Do you want to rest up, Harry?" Tonks asked. "You look dead on your feet and I could do with something to eat. It's been a long day."

I glanced at the buildings around us. Most were a torn ruin, yet a few looked stable enough to rest in. Just across the street there was a conical complex that still had glass in the windows. Small wonders over ten-thousand years. It was foolish to rest here, but it did seem like a very good idea. I could raise certain protections that would see us through the night.

"Okay, we can spend the... night... in there, I guess." And I suppose I could fix up my hand as best I could. "And I could really go a beer."

"We did not bring beer, 'Arry."

"Yes we did." I grinned. "I snuck in a six-pack when you weren't looking."

The glass in the window held as I forced open the heavy door, pushing against the weight of dust and debris. Inside the air was stale, the whole room dim and dreary. Faint blue lights on the walls offered little in the way of warmth and light. I levitated the trunks in one by one, stacking them against the far wall on the petrified remains of what could've been a dining table.

"Head into the next room," I said. "And make as little noise as possible, guys. We don't want to attract the attention of... anything."

"Anything?" Tonks asked. Her wand had been out since the cavern back in Italy.

"It's been ten-thousand years since this city died in so much fire, blood and pain... a lot of resentment has festered over that time."

"Resentment from what?"

Another bark of short, humourless laughter. "The better-left-forgotten."

I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Story of my life, dontcha know. But I was the right man for the job.

One of the trunks we had rigged with a freezing charm held enough meat to last about three months, another cooled crate contained fruit and vegetables under preservation charms, as well as bread and butter. However, no one was in the mood to cook up a storm, so we broke into our supply of tinned food and cooked soup over a magical flame right in the can.

We had enough canned soup to last for the rest of our lives. Two of the magically expanded trunks were filled with nothing but soup. There was nothing to eat here in Atlantis, nothing but dust and ash.

The soup was good. It was better than good. I had two cans of chunky chicken and potato and let the warmth flow through me, replenishing some of my diminished energy. It had been a long day, I was exhausted. After battling goblins, Aurors, Orc-Mare, losing half a hand and bridging a gap between worlds, I was about ready to call it a day.

As for my half a hand, there was also the emergency medical supply trunk. It was stocked with potions, poultices, vials of pain-numbing potions, pepper-up potions, and everything in between that could give a quick fix to a bad day. Fleur had purchased most of this stuff in Rome the other day, at the Via Magicka – Italy's answer to Diagon Alley – with the galleons I had tricked out of Miguel Blue.

I did the mending myself, applied the poultices that sealed over the finger stumps as if they'd had months to heal, and took a few bone-mending concoctions that tasted awful but knitted the bones back together. When I was done, my hand was as whole as it could be given the lack of a few fingers – and it no longer hurt.

"You know with a bit of Skele-Gro and a few weeks in St. Mungo's, you might be able to get those fingers back, Harry." Tonks was cautiously optimistic.

I nodded. "Yeah maybe..." For now my hand was functional. I could grip things, even make a fist. I didn't worry over the loss of two fingers and a bunch of scar tissue.

We sat in the back room of what had probably been an Atlantean dwelling. The lights did not work in here, but there was seating, armchairs, that a bit of transfiguration fixed up just nicely. Fleur had even cast a few heating charms to keep us warm. We were alone, for the most part, in a dead city that existed in a limbo-state between this world and the next, but there was soup, and a soft-glowing orb of pale white light.

"We sleep in shifts tonight," I said, thinking of the mounting risk of being as exposed as we were. I needed to get to the Shipyards, to the old vessels there that I knew how to fortify. Perhaps we wouldn't spend the whole night here. It was dark outside – as dark as it got – a mix of failed twilight and a dusky, starless sky. "Two of us awake at all times. I'll stay up first with Jason. Ladies, decide amongst yourselves who's waking up in three hours."

"What are you on watch for, 'Arry?" Fleur asked.

I only shrugged. "For whatever..."

This whole war runs red with shame...

Sometime after midnight, if such a time of half-light could be called midnight, I was shaken awake by Fleur, who looked pale in the faint glow of our magic-sphere.

"Zere is something out there, 'Arry..." Her voice was a hurried whisper, her accent slipping through hard. "I 'ave heard it twice now."

I was up in an instant, feeling little better for an hour's nap. With Fleur was Grace, who sat with her arms around her knees next to Jason, gazing out through the doorway into the front room. "It sounded like a scream out in the street," the young research assistant said. "Like a... roar."

"Probably just a lion," I quipped.

I thought about waking Tonks and Jason, both of them frowning in their sleep in armchairs of their own, but decided against it for now. I cocked an ear and listened hard at the night, but didn't hear a thing.

"It's an empty city," I said. "Sound can travel pretty far—"

AIIEEEE!

"Or it could be just around the corner. Damn." I took a deep breath. "That's a frask."

"And a frask iz... what?" Fleur held her wand at the ready.

"Trouble, and in our road, sweetheart." With a flick of my wand I doused the light and the heating charms, extinguished all the magic. We stood quiet in a room of the false-light now. "Wake Tonks and Jason – quietly – and don't use any magic."

Another scream cut through the night, joined by another away through the wall on our left. There was more than one of them. Of course there was, my ravaged memories told me, frasks hunt in packs.

"Arry, what iz a frask?"

"Nightmares attracted by magic," I whispered, peering out through the doorway and glimpsing the dusty street beyond. Nothing I could see lurked in the shadows. But then I suppose I wouldn't see it. "Hard to kill – they just absorb magic, any magic. It's like trying to put a fire out with kerosene... can't be done."

"What's that?" Tonks asked, stifling a yawn. She got up to stand at my left, Fleur on my right.

"We're being hunted," I said, as if over drinks. "Don't use any magic and keep... quiet."

Ten minutes fled in tense silence, my ears straining to hear the sound of scraping claws in the dust, the heavy breathing in hungry throats, or that sickly scream alive in the night. There was nothing. I was beginning to hope that we'd dodged a bullet. My luck was never that good, though, but at least I knew it. I remained vigilant.

"Okay..." I let out a long breath a few minutes later. "We have to move now. Those things will circle until they find us."

"And they want... magic?" Fleur asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, they feed on it – or, more accurately, they feed on anything touched by magic. That counts for everyone in this room, even Jason and Grace."

Jason had a thought. "Can't you just... I dunno... if magic won't work, crush them under something using your magic."

I shrugged. "It's a good idea, mate, in theory, but that something would have to be made of mythrill."

"Why?"

"It's half the reason most of the city is built with that mythrill-iridium cocktail, to keep these creatures from tearing through the walls. Atlantis was destroyed overnight, but the war for the city was fought over many years all that time ago. Many things... many terrible things, weapons and monsters, were created by both sides." It would've been very cool to live back then. "And before you ask, no, it's not possible to pull down the buildings around us on top of the frisks. As I said earlier, it would take considerable demonic effort to break down these walls."

"So we just run?" Tonks asked.

I nodded. "We're heading to the Shipyards. What remains of the Atlantean fleet is docked there. It's about a distance of three or four miles... due west." We could make that, sure we could. "I can activate certain protections there that'll keep out the worst of the leftovers roaming these streets. It's our best chance. Let's get going."

"What about—"

"Leave the trunks, Tonks, we'll come back for them later when we're better equipped."

Both Grace and Jason picked up their research bags before we left, but apart from that we took nothing.

The streets were as empty as they had been for the best part of ten-thousand years when we left our supplies behind and ducked out into the shadows and the dust. There were furrows cut through the layers of ash, bounding claw marks from at least three distinct sets of razor-sharp claws.

"We proceed very, very quietly," I said to the group, and then took the lead.

Whereas before the streets had been simply quiet and old, worn down and broken, there was an air of menace now. It was something I had felt from the start, but was only just being realised by my companions. I kept Fleur next to Jason and Grace, and Tonks on the other side. A tight-knit group should we be attacked.

They'll go for me first anyway, I thought, straining hard to recall all I knew of frasks. Ugly buggers with a lot of teeth, but I'm the greatest source of magic around here...

So we fled through the night past marvels of magic and technology, hugging the sides of the buildings and heading west down a gently curving landscape of ash and broken promise. It had been a long time since this city had existed in the real world, whole and alive, but magic had sustained it as much as possible. Atlantis did look barren, lifeless, but only maybe for a decade. Not ten millennia.

We turned a corner and found ourselves at the top of a rather large hill. It gave a commanding view down through the city, a clear view of the coast and the harbour, glittering in the dull twilight. As I'd said before, the coast was devoid of an ocean – just a rocky seabed of gnarled coral and broken reef, disappearing over a blurred horizon.

"We can follow this road straight down," I said. "See that big domed building with the ring of flashing lights...?" I pointed to the harbour. "That's our home away from home, ladies and gentle—"

The frask emerged from the shadows away to our left and tackled me hard, knocking me to the ground and rolling on top of me, yellow-teeth bared and thin, red slits glaring bloody-murder. It screeched triumph in my face.

"HARRY!"

It was roughly human in shape, although unnaturally thin and skeletal. Grey skin, pasty and lifeless, seemed stretched over an elongated frame. In place of eyes there were two crescent slits like bleeding sores, and it was entirely hairless. As well as the teeth, the frask had three talons on either hand, as sharp as razors and as black as night.

I kept rolling, instinct kicking in faster than thought, and used its weight against it, bringing my legs up and booting the damn thing in the stomach. It leapt back, stung but uninjured, and swiped at my face as I rolled away. Its claw caught me on the forearm, cutting open my suit and drawing a thin line of hot crimson blood.

"Malia Lestic!"

A blast of silver curse light struck the frask in its chest just before it dived for me again. Tonks stood close by, her wand levelled against the beast and all her Auror training coming to the forefront in her stance. That curse was designed to bludgeon through shield charms and send the unfortunate recipient hurtling back with enough force to shatter bone.

The frask absorbed the spell like a sponge soaking up water. Its skin bled silver light as the spell dissipated against its form, and the creature screeched raw delight at being fed. It turned from me to the source of the spell, the closest, freshest magic, and roared at Tonks, spittle and sparks of her power flying from its mouth.

Before I could move, before I could even sit up, the creature leapt into Tonks, its jaws snapping and biting at her face.

"NO!"

Fleur screamed, Jason swore, Grace pulled something from the bag she was carrying around her neck and, with a surprising calm in her eyes, drove it deep into the hide of the frask as it went for Tonks' throat. The creature's whole body jittered with hard spasms as the piece of mythril-iridium Jason had collected earlier was driven through its back and out through its chest.

The frask hit Tonks as dead weight, a spike of hardened elemental mythril sticking out of its chest. It still knocked her to the ground, but it was thrashing now in its death throes, and she quickly squirmed from under it, a thick brown syrupy substance covering the front of her robes – frask blood.

Grace covered her mouth with her hand and backed away from the dying creature, her eyes wide and somewhat amazed at what she had done. She looked at me, afraid, and I looked back at her in a new light. Perhaps it had been a good idea to bring her along after all.

"That was pretty hot." I grinned. "Two points for quick thinking, two points for style, and two points for hitting a moving target."

At that moment, screeches tore the restored silence of the street apart. In the distance, on either side, howls and roars of an inhuman variety sent my blood running cold.

"Run," I said. The hunt was on. "Run. Now. Don't stop, don't look back."

We ran.

We ran fast and we ran hard.

Down the hill and toward the salvation I'd promised at the Shipyards within the dry harbour.

It's a funny old life, I thought, stomping ash beneath my shoes and breathing hard. Always running either towards or away from danger. And I hadn't even faced Voldemort yet this time around.

We were down the hill and a mile into our run when the chase began in earnest. I looked back, against my own advice, and glimpsed at least half a dozen murky-grey shapes bolting down the rise after us on thin, impossible legs. They leapt fifteen-feet in a single bound. The screeches that chased us down the hill were raw with anger, no doubt over the loss of one of their own...

"Keep going," I breathed. "Must go faster now."

I brandished my wand and lit a few magical fires as we ran. Tasty snacks that would slow the frisks down, but make them all the stronger for feeding. We needed time – only minutes – to cover the distance across the harbour to the Shipyards.

We got them, thanks in part to my fires. The outlandish architecture and hazy-blue neon lights whirled by and we came to an open space. Ship docks with dilapidated piers stretching out over an ocean that was no longer there. There was the smell of salt on the air, a tired marine water aroma of the long ago. And, yes, of the better-left-forgotten.

I led my companions at a jog now, all of us gasping in air, past cranes and rusted work equipment. There were bollards and containers, as well as strange vehicles littering the docks. A lot less ash had settled on this part of the city, but our hurried footsteps still kicked up clouds of the stuff, marking our trail out brilliantly for any pursuers.

"Follow me," I said as we came to the large domed structure I'd pointed out on the top of the hill. Without maintaining any pretence of this being all new to me, I ran up a set of concrete steps and slammed my fist against a control panel next to a set of large barred doors. The panel spluttered to life and the doors retracted on screeching rollers about halfway. "Inside. Now."

I waited for the others to enter before I did, and glanced back across the docks just as the pack of frasks entered the harbour hot on our heels.

"Merlin, Harry," Tonks said as I ducked under the door and joined them inside, "just what is this place?"

I set off at a run toward the heart of the complex, down a flight of metallic stairs and across a walkway that was covered in frayed cabling and boxes of components that looked like they belonged to the Muggle world. Small spheres of light appeared beneath my feet as I ran, lighting the way.

The space we had entered was huge. Massive. "It's bigger on the inside," I said. "Like the trunks, you know, relativistic-spacial magic. This is one of the command hubs for the Atlantean military. They built their warships in here, brought them in for repairs. It's part dry dock, part landing platform. Look over there."

Lights had been coming on steadily across the entire space since we entered, responding to our presence. A lot of them were dead or cut-off from the main power source running beneath the city, but there was enough light to see by... and what it revealed was astonishing.

There were about two dozen large docks, each containing a berth at least one hundred feet across and wide. Along the far wall were massive shipping doors that opened out onto the empty sea, a sheer drop to the dusty ocean floor below could be glimpsed amidst the twilit heavens. However, it was what was in the berths that demanded attention.

In about six of the docking berths rested large, cream-white galleons. Multi-decked sailing ships that looked like they'd fallen straight out of the seventeenth century. Although not quite. There were differences. These ships, complete with wooden masts and large, furled sails, were more streamlined.

"Head for the far right," I said. "That one with the white finish and gold trim."

It was an Atlantean Eternity Class Destroyer. Inoperable, dead for ten-thousand years, but with a bit of tweaking... it had five massive masts, heavy sails and a long beak, with a square cabin at the stern.

I knew there to be weapons on board. Weapons we could use against—

AIIEEE!

The frasks slammed through the side door behind us, twisting the metal frame and tearing it from the runners. Quick as lightning they were after us, bounding down the lit metallic walkway and screaming for our heads.

We took a right off the main causeway and all at once the warship reared up before us. It wasn't as high as it should be, as the water had receded beneath it and left it sitting on old concrete. It listed to the left, towards us, but only at a slight angle.

"Climb up the rigging there," I said. "Make ready to set sail! Ha!"

Jason and Grace were up first, climbing atop the walkway and stepping up onto the listing vessel. Fleur and Tonks went next, just as the frasks drew level with us...

"Incendios-grata!"

My trusty old supercharged fire spell. I ignited the path with magical fire – with frask-food – and the monsters chasing us dove headfirst into the flame, absorbing the magical element, relishing in the heat and growing stronger...

I stepped up off the walkway as it buckled and melted under the heat, and jumped back onto the main deck of the ship – alive and a little singed.

"Keep moving – this way!"

The deck was strewn with rope and cables, as well as technologically-advanced cannons mixed in amongst the masts and

sails. The whole warship was a blur of ancient magical power and seventeenth century maritime design. Enough to make one's head spin.

Fleur and Tonks, Jason and Grace, followed me down to the stern of the vessel, stepping over the abandoned cabling and repair tools the Atlanteans had abandoned in a hurry, past a row of chests bolted to the deck, and through a door that hung half-open, caked with dust.

Once everyone was inside I slammed the door behind us, sealing it with a sticking charm and igniting my wand with a sphere of pure white light. Outside, we heard the frasks leaping up onto the deck after us, claws tap-tap-tapping against the wooden decking.

"Take a minute to catch your breath, folks," I said. "We've got that much time..."

"This room is a dead-end, Harry," Tonks said, looking around. "Just a bunch of dusty cabinets—"

I flicked my wand and the cabinets creaked open, the hinges holding well after all this time. Inside was an array of different weaponry – swords and knives, battleaxes and shields. All of them shone like dull silver, tempered with fierce steel. The strange, glittery glow emanating from the blades was distinctly familiar.

"Yep, those are mythrill weapons. Designed for work such as what awaits me out on the deck." Something slammed into the door – hard – bringing a curtain of dust swirling down onto our heads. "Wait a goddamn minute!"

"What are you suggesting?" Jason asked. "That we fight those things with these weapons? Harry, are you insane?"

"Quite insane," Fleur said, but there was a smile playing about her lips. "The right kind of insane, non?"

I winked. "This is war, Jason. Get used to it, because there's no way out. Not ever." Didn't I know the truth of that.

"Madness—"

Another frask hurled itself against the flimsy wooden door. A large splinter cracked right through the paintwork,

"Cheer up, buddy. You've wanted Atlantis your whole life – now's the time to fight for it." I gazed at the glittering weapons and settled on one in particular. That one would be mine. "Watch me... and do as I do."

To fade into insignificance... to prevail within chaos... what do I fight for? What is more priceless than my very soul?

I leapt from the cabin, jumped up onto the chests and hurled myself through the air, screaming at the top of my lungs and bringing the mythrill axe swinging down around over my head.

The snarling frask didn't stand a fucking chance.

I cleaved it in two, my weapon still sharp despite the long millennia it had sat idle. Blood, brown and as thick as syrup, spurted up and splashed my suit, my face. Vital organs spilled onto the decking of the old warship and my battleaxe thunked into the planks beneath me.

I wrenched it free just as the next frask leapt at me, teeth bared and claws tearing for my throat. I ducked and brought the axe swinging up from underneath, hacking into the exposed stomach of the monster. Another shower of blood and guts and all things nice sent me into a fury that had, honest and true, ended the world.

"COME ON, YOU FUCKERS!"

Mere seconds had passed since I emerged from the cabin. I was Harry Potter. Wizard extraordinaire. Fuck with me at your own risk...

The frasks attacked on mass, screaming for my blood. In my fury I was untouchable, unable to feel pain or hurt...

Each swing of my axe brought a satisfying burst of pallid grey flesh and golden-brown syrup spraying up in vicious fountains. I swam in it, I bathed in the chaos, and the deck of the Atlantean galleon ran slick with the blood of my enemies.

Mindless in their assault, much akin to my good self, the frasks threw themselves at me, dived into my path of carnage. Claws tore at my clothes, cutting through the cloth like butter and pierced my skin, drawing long lines of blood down my arms, across my chest... one smacked me in the face, dislodging my glasses and cutting open my cheek.

I laughed. "Bastard!" And took it in the neck, turning the flat of my axe just as the blade cleared its throat and smacked its head across the deck in a spray of vital fluid. It bounced off the mast and nearly went into the netting before the sails. Damn. Almost a goal.

There was only one frask left standing, snarling, amidst the ruin of its kind.

"And Potter lines up for another shot." I screamed and grit my teeth, snarling in return. I swung hard and... the axe flew from my hands. "Swing and a miss! Fuck!"

My hands, and the axe handle, were slick with my blood-with monster blood- sweat, tears and all that's in between... the weapon slipped from my grip and I fell to my knees, gasping for breath and ducking glistening talons by a scant inch. The frask fell on top of me, sensing its advantage, and I was spent. I didn't even have my wand, much good it would've done me anyway.

Thin and skeletal it may have been, but the frask was heavy, it's breath rank with ten-thousand year old death. It screeched loud enough to shatter glass and reared back, opening its jaws wide to tear out my throat.

But then Fleur was there – all of my few, desperate allies were – carrying mythrill weapons from the ship's armoury. Fleur held a slim rapier, and the fury in her eyes was a match for my own, as she lopped the head from the frask's neck without a moment of hesitation.

Did I mention that I loved Fleur?

Jason helped me to my feet. My suit jacket was in tatters and I shrugged out of it. My shirt was no better, but it held, even as my blood seeped into the fabric from the dozen or so slashes the frisks had inflicted. We stood amongst the sick remains of the nightmare creatures. A horrible stink rose from the bodies.

"And how many points for zat, 'Arry?" Fleur asked, breathing hard, and yet still a picture of poised elegance and eternal grace.

"Two points for perfect timing, two points for making it look easy... and two points for not getting a drop of blood on you." I thought back. "That puts you tied with Grace for Atlantis' Coolest Kill award."

I was calming down now. The whole chopping episode fading away... My entire body felt like I'd gone ten rounds with a mountain troll.

"Come on, Harry, I need to clean you up again. Some of those cuts look nasty."

"What would I do without you, Tonks...?" There was serious weight behind that question. Worlds of weight.

"You'd have bled to death days ago," she quipped, and that was probably the truth.

I limped over to one of the bolted down chests and sat down. I'd done a lot of bleeding over this long day, a lot of warring and screaming. I was about ready to collapse – beyond ready to collapse.

"You're a crazy bastard, Harry. You know that?"

"Yeah... but I get results, Jason." It hurt to chuckle. "Damn. Let's go find somewhere I can bleed in peace and quiet for a few hours. Who knows what tomorrow will bring, eh?"

I was hoping it would involve beer and cigars.

A/N: No promises on the next chapter, but then I didn't expect to get this one done for another month or so, so you might get lucky. What d'you think? First glimpse at Atlantis, and it's not a friendly place. More will be explained next chapter, more will come into focus... just what is Harry's plan from here on out? It seems to have something to do with the Shipyards...

Whatever he's up to, it's clear his insanity is slipping into the danger zone. The more insane he gets the more beer I have to drink to write that insanity, so it's kind of a win for me either way. Still, could be trouble for Harry and company in future chappies.

Thanks for reading – please review. We're at 1100 now, heading on the up and up... yeehaw, yeehaw.

-Joe

Chapter 21 – The Time Traveller's Memory

Heard ten thousand whispering and nobody listening.
Heard one person starve, I heard many people laughing.
Heard the song of a poet who died in the gutter.

~Bob Dylan

Blood, sweat and tears marred my scarred and ruined face.

Victory or defeat has become relative – has almost ceased to matter.
Whether I win or lose is no longer the question. If I fail then I failed
whilst setting the world ablaze, and if I win...

If I should win, and one day grow old in truth, and if for just one brief
lifetime I should live and die and stay dead, then the walls of reality
will not crumble and it will be like waking from a dream of fiery roses
to find one clutched in my hand, untarnished and pure, the thorns
drawing blood across my palm...

The walls may hold, the glass may no longer fly, but what happens
next?

Aye, but what happens next?

"So let me get this straight," Tonks said, choosing her words carefully.
"Your plan to stop Voldemort seizing the power of Atlantis and
unleashing a demonic horde upon the world is to... let him... seize the
power of Atlantis and unleash a demonic horde upon the world."

I nodded. "The devil's in the details, but yeah, that's the plan."

Tonks looked to Fleur, to Jason, to Grace as if she'd missed
something. "Well, I vote for a new plan."

"No." I shook my head. "This is a good plan."

"Perhaps not, 'Arry," Fleur suggested, resting a gentle hand on my shoulder.

We were all below deck on the Atlantean battleship. The battle with the frasks had left me woozy from the fight and all the blood I'd lost. Tonks had patched me up, sealed all the cuts, yet I was fixing for a few blood-replenishing potions and perhaps something to put me to sleep for a few years. It had been a long, long day.

Sitting shirtless on a dusty cot in what would've been the captain's quarters, I gazed out of the shattered windows of the cruiser, out over the dry dock to the barren ocean beyond the mighty slipway. It was a stark and lifeless world outside this ship, under a blurred twilit sky. Thin lamps of faded blue light had ignited in our presence, but the light was as old as the rest of this world...

"At least those stitches have held after all that," Grace said, pointing to the half-healed stab wound in my side.

Another week or so and they could come out. I would still make Saturnia bleed for the pain she had caused there. Tricky demon bitch. That is, if I ever saw her again...

"Aye," I said, and turned back to Tonks. "My plan still stands, Tonks. In order for us to get home Voldemort has to take Atlantis – not all of it, just enough – and awaken the Bone-Men so this whole place blurs with our world... before that happens, we're going to amass a helluva lot of power of our own here."

"You've got this all planned out, have you?"

"Given lifetimes, I don't think I could come up with anything better." And wasn't that the fucking truth. "This will work because it has to."

Tonks ran her hands back through her bubblegum-pink hair, her eyes flashed with frustration, and her fringe darkened to jade. "You're playing with my – with our – trust a lot, Harry, you know that, don't you?" She shook her gorgeous head. "There's stuff you're not telling us."

I had to struggle not to roll my eyes. Of course there was. More than you could ever understand, ladies and gentlemen, more than the better-left-forgotten will ever let you understand. So just let it lie, let it lie and let it die, boss, can ya dig it, because all the Coca-Cola and bourbon in the world can't make a dent in this headache.

This sumabitch headache.

I didn't say that. Didn't say any of that... Instead I looked down at my bare chest, at the new lines of thin white scar tissue that crisscrossed my body. They were barely visible against my pale skin, but the frasks had left their mark, sure and true. Even magic couldn't erase the wounds of anti-magic entirely. That's what the frasks were, after all, resistant.

"I'm playing this whole adventure as best I can, Tonks." The truth, but as rotten as a lie. Worse than a lie, perhaps. "I warned you all about this before you came with me. Told you all that it had to happen certain ways, that you had to trust me." I turned to the shimmering curtain of platinum-blond hair standing at my shoulder. "Fleur, you trust me, don't you?"

Fleur's smile was a touch weary. "You've earned a leetle trust, 'Arry, yes, but our trust should also earn us a few answers..."

I sighed – a wretched, tired thing – and raised my hands in defeat. "I've had visions of Atlantis for weeks, through this damned scar on my forehead. I'm the bloody Chosen One fated to either die or defeat Lord fucking Voldemort, yippee-de-da, there's your answers. Anything else is just the devil and his details, okay."

I was on my feet now, dizzy and drained. I'd gone too far today, done too much... the fatigue and the blood loss were only half of it. The world was heavy here, heavy, and it weighed on what was left of my soul like a fucking anvil—

I swayed forward and Fleur and Tonks caught me, both under an arm, and lowered me back down onto the cot. The world was still spinning, still hammering a goddamned spike through my skull, and I was going to throw up, of that I was quite sure.

I moaned, gripped by the nausea, sure that this old warship was swaying back and forth on the high seas under the pull of a tropical hurricane. This was all happening far too easily, far too effortlessly—

—"He said his name is Harry. Harry Potter."—

Oh and here came memory. Was it a happy memory screaming and laughing through the maelstrom of time-ruined thought in my head? Was it fuck.

—"He was brought in two days ago. Multiple fractures to his spine, both legs broken in seven different locations. His right arm had to be amputated at the shoulder, the left is set due to a severe compound fracture and third-degree burns. There's massive internal trauma, but somehow he's still with us... he's talking."—

Happy memories are few and far between, folks, because they leave no real impression. The Patronus Charm is testament enough to that. One of the hardest charms in the New World, and why is that...? The wand movements are easy, even unnecessary, and there's no real power required. It's hard because so few people can separate true happiness from reality, from the better-left-forgotten, and the raw, pure moments from the pain.

Because happiness is just a feeling, almost not felt at all, whereas pain is real, pain is constant, pain is nightmare. Pain is time... and a clock on the face of hell. Fleur's face hovered over mine, Tonks at her left. They were beautiful even behind eyes that swam with tears I'd never shed, even from within a mind as broken and torn as mine. I was losing consciousness and memory was rising, memory as terrible as the future, that came from the future... can ya say maybe yes and maybe no...

"Can you hear me, Harry?"

Someone flashed a light in my eyes and I winced against the shudders that wracked my ruined body. I was in a hospital, of that I

was sure, a Muggle hospital, and I was in such a sorry state that not even magic could save me now.

"Just pull the plug," I said, my voice a harsh croak. "Do us all a favour and send me back." The someone with the light came into a harsh focus. It was a woman, a young woman, her auburn hair tied back in a bun and a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles hugging her face. For a moment my mind wouldn't process her face, wouldn't link reality with what I was seeing... "Hi, mum," I said.

The woman frowned. "My name is Doctor Lovett, Harry. You've been in hospital for two days."

I blinked and saw the woman behind the glasses, saw her true beauty. Whew... if I had all my arms and legs and a working spine I'd have been all over that. I could quickly dismiss my first impression of this Doctor Lovett as my mother. That would open up a whole case of psychological soup that was best avoided.

"Left me for dead..." I said.

"Pardon me?"

It hurt to blink, damn it, and I tried to wipe my forehead with my right arm. It wasn't there. It was... gone. I could still feel it. "I should be dead."

Doctor Lovett clearly thought the same. Whatever was keeping me alive, it wasn't her medicine or even her good intentions. The machines all around me beeped and beeped and yet I'd still be clinging to life without them.

"You were found at Kings Cross on the morning of September 1st, Harry, just outside the station. Can you tell me what happened? Who did this to you?"

I guess the fresh, oozing cuts and the methodical way the bones had been snapped and torn away didn't make all this look like an accident. This woman could have no idea of what I'd been through, what I'd done, yet what harm would the truth do? Insane ramblings for the not-

so-insane. Not yet, anyway. "It was Lestrangle," I said. "Bellatrix Lestrangle. I thought I could take Atlantis alone... I was wrong."

"What?"

"How did I get here?"

"You were found outside the station—"

"How did I get there?" From another world. "How am I...?"

I began to cough, to cough and splutter. I was wracked with tremendous pain, with fresh tearing and a mouthful of heart's blood. You certainly pay for what you get in this world, yes sir, both the good and the bad.

"You're here because I brought you back, Harry Potter. For you to die in Atlantis this late in the game would break the Infernal Clock..."

There was a face leaning in at me over Doctor Lovett's shoulder. A young man's face, vaguely handsome and familiar... his eyes sparkled with intelligence, his cheeks coated in rough stubble. His voice was deep and commanding.

"Who are you?"

He was close enough to run his nose through Doctor Lovett's auburn hair, to brush his cheek against her own, and yet the good doctor didn't seem to notice him, to even sense he was there.

"I'm your doctor, Harry, you—"

"I'm something you haven't created yet, Harry Potter. Or rather... I'm a mistake you made, yes, yes. A ghost of futures yet to come."

"Your name?" I asked.

"Sar—"

"It does not matter. Lives and lives will pass before we meet again – if we meet again – and you'll only remember this conversation should you come dangerously close to failing, to failing for the last time..."

Whoever this man was I knew he was keeping me alive, keeping me tethered to this ruined chance to set things right. It was time I got back, time for me to catch the Dream back to the start.

"You don't exist," I said, trying to blink but unable to do more than draw ragged, shallow breath. "You're not real."

The young man smiled – he grinned from fucking ear to ear. "Exactly, Harry Potter, exactly! I figured you weren't that smart, but you always seem to stumble arse-over-head onto the right path regardless. Yes! Time does not exist and yet it is all that matters... is all that's relative, can ya dig it? Yes, yes you can. No maybe about it, huh."

Doctor Lovett was injecting some sort of clear substance into the bag that ran a line down into my wrist, just below the plaster cast. Whatever it was it was supposed to knock me out cold, I was sure, and the look on her face when my eyes kept flicking back and forth was priceless. Doe (a deer) caught in the headlights, my dear.

"No I can't..."

The man grinned again, and all at once I knew he was insane – that he'd caught insanity like some kind of disease, and whadda'ya reckon, boss, but I think he caught it from me... But there were right kinds of insane, of course there were, and some of them even saved the world.

"The last thing I want to do is hurt you, Harry Potter." That awful shit-kicking grin. "But it's still on the list."

"Do your worst."

"I will. But first, a word to the wise – you have to let them hurt you, too. All of them: the blonde one, the changing-one, even the graceful one and the oh-so-clever one. Hurt is how you win, pain is how you fight. Can ya dig that, Harry Potter?"

I felt something slipping away, something fading like the twilit sky at the end of a true day. Stars were coming out, folks, the super-fun-happy-hour was about to start, and the drinks were on me, only a buck ninety-five for a pint and crisps. I felt something slipping away, and knew it was my life. "Any other advice, pretty boy?"

The young man winked. "Never, under any circumstances, take a sleeping potion and a laxative at the same time."

Well, there you go then.

"I guess with sufficient thrust even pigs may fly, you shouldn't trust me 'cause I lie, and even Harry Potter may finally die..."

That beeping... that constant beep, beep, beeping... was fading away. Here come the stars, I thought, and it was with relief. The man, or whatever he was, something I HADN'T created yet, swam in and out of sight. I could still hear him, though, still feel him...

"You gotta take life with a grain of salt, Harry Potter, yes, yes... and a slice of lemon... with a shot of Jose Cuervo."

"Harry, can you still hear me?"

Doctor?

"Breathe, Harry, breathe!"

"This boy's done all his breathing, ma'am."

That was true enough.

I awoke with a splitting headache – but then what was new about that? – to find the constant twilit haze outside the shattered galleon windows a little brighter, the air blowing a stale, sweet smell off the barren sea. It was coming up for morning, or what trucked for morning here in Atlantis, and I could taste blood in the back of my mouth.

"Memory's suck..." I whispered aloud, trying my voice and finding my throat painfully dry. I could hear soft breathing around me.

There was Fleur in a cot next to mine, and beyond her lay Tonks. Jason and Grace were in small canvas cots of their own, and the drag marks in the dust suggested that they'd pulled those up here from within the bowels of the ship, down in the crew quarters. The door had been barricaded against intrusion, as well, with heavy crates. We were safe as houses, here in our little corner of the Old World.

"Chronos..." I said, the dream of memory still fresh in my tortured mind. I had met him before it seemed, and he had saved me to kill me, to let me die, and impart some garbled advice about how much it all had to hurt. "Merlin save me..." I rubbed my stubbly cheeks. You don't need to tell me how much it hurts...

I found that my feet would support me, which was good, as there was work to do today. Vital work, enough to set the world ablaze – both worlds – but before anything we, I, would need to retrieve our supply trunks from back in the city. There was no other food here, save for what the Death Eaters had up in their dark tower, and that was kind of off-limits.

For now.

Voldemort's portal back to the real world is there, as well, I thought. But there was no way I could use that without the Dark Lord's consent. And that was about as likely as... well, as something not very likely. Damn, that was a no-good comparison. I'd think of a better one...

I took a deep breath, forcing my headache to the back of my mind. I was remembering more now, more than I ever had before, and if truth be told I was terrified. Honest-to-god shitting my pants. Memory sucked, of course it did, because memory could linger. And I couldn't afford any more regret.

"Rise and shine," I said, glancing between my companions. Fleur and Tonks looked beautiful in the half-light. Innocent, almost, and entirely

capable of destroying me. Even Grace, who I knew little about, was strangely alluring in the light. Jason looked tired and was frowning in his sleep. I imagined I did the same.

It was a new day, here in Atlantis, and the city awaited... what memories would see us through before all was said and done on this, my final time, trying to make it all matter?

About as likely as Dumbledore leaning over and saying 'Gee, Harry, that Fleur Delacour chick really gives me a woody'.

Damn. I shuddered.

Harsh but true, that one.

And the taste is... fleeting.

I set to work in earnest that first real day in Atlantis. This time would count for all, and that meant I had to make it matter – make the effort matter - more so than any other life. There was also a kind of cruel manipulation in keeping busy, and we were going to be busy, as it left little time for questions about how I knew what I was doing... for the most part.

If this is to be the last time, I thought, then the truth will out in the end... it has to. That thought made me sick to my stomach.

Alone, shirtless, I walked back through the city in fine shoes and scuffed trouser pants, heading back up the street and the hill that led to the conical-shaped building where we'd abandoned the supply trunks. It had been close outrunning the frisks. I left Fleur, Tonks, Jason and Grace asleep in their cots, mindful that they would only slow me down, and hoped to get back before they awoke. It was a seven mile roundtrip.

Sharp claws had torn my shirt to pieces, and my trousers were in a state, as well. I needed a change of clothes, a hot meal, a shower. All that was the primary objective today. Setting up the base of

operations upon the mighty warship. Getting a few of its rough comforts up and running. Everything else would spiral out from there.

I walked with one hand gripping my wand almost casually at my side. That was my left, the one missing a few fingers, as in my right I gripped the shaft of my battleaxe, leaning the flat of the blade against my bare shoulder. I'd cleaned off the congealed syrupy blood, and in the half-light overhead the mythrill blade shone azure promise.

The trip back through the outskirts of the city was uneventful. I waded back through our hurried tracks, through the knee-high dust in parts, and in the shadows of the larger skyscrapers looming toward the city centre. Especially the largest of all those dark towers, with the eternally glowing sphere of energy atop, glaring down at the world. Voldemort's tower.

"Voldemort's lair," I mumbled.

Why was I here? Was it some burning desire to save the world? Even at this point, the desire was still there, but why did I let it take me so far off the edge of the map? Dumbledore would know – Dumbledore did know – that's why he let me go it alone. Because sometimes you learn by seeing, sometimes you learn by doing. Other times you learn by diving head first into the fire and hoping to all hell it just tickles.

But fire burns. Even dumb kids like me know that. It's just what it does.

I retrieved the trunks from the dusty abandoned building – put on a clean pair of clothes - and levitated them behind me on the way back through the city. It was still deathly quiet, eerily so, but that felt natural, yes sir, that felt wild.

I walked back through the well-worn tracks we'd all made on our mad dash yesterday, keeping a wary eye on the jagged claw marks tearing through the dust and stone beneath my feet. Frisks were a threat, to be sure, but there were other threats in Atlantis. Older threats... that would disagree fiercely with being woken up by a dumb kid wielding a stick and an axe.

Half the threats were only vaguely remembered – like a shadow cast across the face of the sun, if that makes any sense.

I returned to the docks and the hollow shipyards through the hole the frasks had torn in the rusty steel door. I was once again awed at the size of the place, like five quidditch stadiums stacked end-on-end, a lot bigger on the inside than it looked on the out. The silvery-white Atlantean battleship looked good, solid, from this distance, but it needed a lot of work.

With a bit of elbow grease and a touch of starlight, I could even make the bloody thing fly again. Although it was perhaps more effort than I wanted to put in, especially at this point in the war. It was still kind of the pre-game.

With the trunks deposited back on the decking of the warship, I set about cleaning up the blood and heavy chunks of pallid flesh that had, until very recently, been magic-thirsty frasks. A few swipes with the old wand sent most of the crap over the side of the ship, and some superheated jets of steam took care of the rest.

I took a break and an apple from one of the trunks after that, wondering where to start next. The others would be awake soon, if they weren't already, and there was work to be done, oh yes, plenty of work...

To say the ship was in a state of disrepair was an understatement. It was going to take weeks to get it into shape. Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on how you looked at it, we had weeks. Weeks in which to keep busy, to stay alive, to unlock the stagnant mysteries of the Lost City.

"Wards and runes," I said, thinking out loud. "Next should come wards and runes." Protection against the night.

It was funny and... and terrifying... how the memories came back almost as soon as I needed them. Some were there straight away, others I didn't know I knew until I knew them, if you follow me, but a lot of it was like riding a broom – you never forgot how, you just forgot when.

With my wand tip ablaze with a narrow blue flame I carved and scorched old Atlantean runes into the decking and masts all over the shape. Small runes, no bigger than a galleon, but plenty of them. On their own the runes were negligible, almost pointless, but together they formed a network of formidable protection.

There was a library here in Atlantis, a library that put the one beneath Rome to shame. It was there I had learnt these runes, this spellwork, so many lifetimes ago. I'd visit that library again in a few days, maybe a week. I needed to burn it to the ground before Voldemort happened upon its unimaginable power. That was power only I would wield – power to die for. As I said, it's funny how the memories come back... but it is also desperately terrifying.

"You are here, 'Arry," Fleur said, emerging up the steps onto the lower decking of the ship. She looked a touch dishevelled for a night on the cot, but still a picture of untouchable elegance.

"Good morning, Fleur. I'm just setting up some wards to keep things like those frasks away. Turning this whole ship practically invisible to non-human eyes."

"Sounds... like impressive magic, oui?" Fleur ran her hand over one of the smoky ruins carved into the mizzenmast.

"It's necessary magic." I shrugged. "I went and got the trunks."

"By yourself?"

I nodded. "Safer that way – for all of us. Last night with the frasks was just... unlucky."

"How do you know what they're called, 'Arry? How do you know so much?"

"My scar—"

"Does not account for everything, non."

I ran my maimed hand back through my hair. It was knotted and greasy. Next step was setting up the bathroom and shower facilities. "I was thinking pancakes for breakfast. Yes?"

Fleur tsked. "No – far too heavy – and do not change ze subject."

I took a moment to reply, to remain calm and reasonable through my headache. I wanted to kiss Fleur and shut her up. I wanted to tell her everything and nothing. And I wanted to kiss her. The truth will out in the end, I was beginning to believe, because I couldn't afford secrecy and redemption, probably deserved neither, and oh I wanted to kiss Fleur. Hell, it was technically eight o'clock in the morning and I wanted a beer. I was cool like that.

"Allow me a few secrets for now, would you," I eventually said. "Trust me that it's in everyone's best interests."

"What iz 'Arry Potter afraid of?" Fleur said, folding her arms over her chest and hugging herself close. "Monsters? Dark wizards? Mad quests for ancient cities? Non... he fears telling ze truth to a girl who owes him her life, to a girl who 'as grown to care for him very much."

Fleur's beauty lent her great confidence. Confidence enough to challenge me, and the harmful insanity she had to see playing behind my eyes. In her stance I saw that she would relent – for now – and trust me as I had come to earn, but she wanted answers. Well... by hook or by crook, she wouldn't get them until I was ready, if I was ever ready.

"You... care for me?"

Fleur smiled softly. "Oui, 'Arry. Of course I do."

Damn it all, but I felt a warm stupid blush rising in my cheeks. "...Why?"

"Because you are doing ze right thing... at great personal cost."

I sat down on one of the trunks and after a moment Fleur joined me. Her presence was wonderful, strawberries and fresh rainfall, and she

did not hesitate to hold my hand – the left one, the one missing a few fingers, crisscrossed with horrid scar tissue. I stared down at my hand in hers, at something so ugly in something so perfect.

"I care for you, too," I said, and almost felt like I was going to cry. I was tired enough, oh yes, so tired. But I hadn't shed a tear in lifetimes... not in pain, or grief, or anger... not in love. I did not cry when the world ended, and I did not cry now. "I care for you very, very much, Fleur Delacour. So please forgive me my secrets for now..."

I stroked my chin, rubbing the fuzzy stubble that belonged to a kid I hadn't been in such a long time. When I spoke, my voice was calm, careful... "Unfortunately, I must decline your offer."

Voldemort nodded once, almost respectfully. "Very well."

"Okay... so, here's how it lays out." I paused for effect. "We are at war, ladies and gentlemen."

It was surprising spacious in the galley of the warship. In its time, the ship would have been crewed by three dozen people – soldiers – and could be away for months at a time, sailing a world a lot bigger than the one we had left behind. It hadn't just sailed the oceans or the skies, either, it had sailed through realms of forgotten magic. The realms of Fée and Forget – a place I had once been to, once died in, once made a deal with the devil in...

Anyway, the galley was the food preparation area for the ancient Atlanteans, complete with a long table and bench bolted to the planks beneath our feet. It was, of course, bigger on the inside than out – just like the Shipyards itself – a nifty bit of special-relativistic magic. In fact, the entire ship was dotted with spots of expanded space. The crew quarters were large enough to sleep forty, the officers' and captain's cabins were spacious enough for all of us to live in relative comfort.

"War," Jason said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He frowned at the word. "You've explained this, Harry. A wizarding war against Voldemort."

"And the Death Eaters," Grace chimed in, blushing when my gaze settled on her. It was clear that I unnerved her.

I could have that effect, I suppose – hard to notice these things when chopping up demons with a ten-thousand year old axe.

"Right," I said. "And as of right now, you've all been drafted – pressed into service, if you will – in that war."

"I beg your pardon?" Jason said, still frowning.

Tonks sat back on the bench, picking at the plate of food before her with a shiny silver fork. The galley had been fully stocked with cookware, utensils and such. "I'm actually already enlisted, Harry, you know. Auror and all that tosh."

"You hear about the organisation Hermione kind of tricked me into last year? Got Dumbledore thrown out of Hogwarts?"

Tonks grinned. "Dumbledore's Army."

"Aye, that's the one. Well, it's a lot better than the Auror corps, so how about you come work for us?"

Tonks snorted laughter, her hair shimmering through viridian-sky, electric-blue, sunburst-yellow... Jason watched her with amazement in his eyes. "You've got a better gig than the Ministry, huh?"

I shrugged. "I won't lie, it'll be a lot more dangerous than Auror work. We'll be facing Voldemort head on." Time to sweeten the deal. "But Dumbledore's Army has a really, really good amenities room. Milk in the fridge and magazines only three months old on the table."

"I might be out of a job anyway by the time we get back, Harry. I was on leave for a few days to find you for the Order. When I don't show

up Monday morning at the Ministry they're going to think I ran afoul of a few Death Eaters."

"It's settled then. Starting rate is a hundred thousand galleons a month and any treasure you care to plunder."

"We are a pirate ship then, 'Arry?" Fleur asked, smirking from behind a can of Coca-Cola. She was well and truly addicted to the stuff now.

"You don't have a hundred thousand galleons, though. If what you told me about the goblins wanting your head is true, then they would've made your accounts disappear."

"Zis is true."

I smiled a clever little smile and rested my chin on my hand. "In a few days I'll have enough galleons to fight a thousand wars, Tonks. A thousand thousand wars."

"All good and well, I'm sure," Jason said, seated next to Grace across the table. "But getting back to this 'pressed into service' business, Harry. Are you serious?"

"I'm always serious, Jase, you should know that by now."

"I came here to study Atlantis."

"And so you shall," I assured him. "But if one of those cannons up on deck is pointed between Voldemort's glowing crimson snake eyes, I expect you to fire the bloody thing."

"You think you can get those working?" Grace asked. "Harry, they're thousands of years old!"

"Bit of starlight and spellwork, this old ship will be sailing again in no time..."

Jason pointed out the obvious. "The ocean here dried up a long time ago."

"Also, zere are no stars, 'Arry. Just zis constant twilight."

"What is starlight but light anyway?" I asked. "This stuff won't be as potent as the mix we had back in Italy, because the light here is... weak is a good word... but it will do the job for now."

"Weak?" Jason asked.

I nodded. "Weak. Because time is messed up. And light is time."

Tonks and Fleur looked perplexed, but Jason and Grace were nodding. A light year was not a measure of time but a measure of distance, and yet all we saw was a measure of light – of time. Seconds only became minutes because light pierced the inevitable veil of darkness... yet here light was failing, the world had ended – Atlantis was in her death throes.

"Next order of business, we need to christen this ship something cool..." I said. "Any suggestions? Her Majesty's Ship...?"

"Gryffindor?" Tonks suggested, with a wry grin.

"God no," I replied. "No, no, no – far too obvious." I tapped my chin. "HMS Kickass!"

"Non," Fleur said. "I will not sail in zat."

"But we are gonna kick so much ass," I pleaded my case. "Seriously."

"Non."

"The lady has spoken..." I glanced around the cabin for inspiration and came up with nada and zilch. "Okay, ship name is on hold for now, I guess. Let's clean this place up instead."

And so past our first glorious day in the millennia-old Lost City, straddling the border between one world and the next, the Found City of Atlantis. Fleur, Tonks and I mucked-out the dust and the debris from within the battleship, casting cleaning charms and scrubbing

spells. Notable magic, to be sure, as Jason and Grace watched with mouths agape at the streams of energy that cleansed the old ship.

In the last few days they had seen battles, they had seen Demon's Light, they had breathed the air of another world, yet magic was still as foreign to them as saving the world was to me... Ha-ha, I can laugh at my own misfortune!

Below deck near the stern of the ship were the officer's quarters, five rooms of relative size and comfort – one of which I had claimed the previous evening, which we had all slept in – and I was going from room to room now, airing them out, and attempting to spell the basic shower and toilet facilities. In the bowels of the ship was an empty water tank that a few Aguamenti charms filled.

It was all real slow-going...

It took a bit of tinkering, but as before the memories of doing it all lifetimes ago were right there, on the tip of my brain, just waiting for me to get my shit together. The toilets would usually just drain into the ocean when the ship was at sea, so a quick fix for the lack of ocean involved a recycling vanishing charm in the pipes that dealt with any waste. And that took care of the facilities. A lot of the magic was still in place, even after ten-thousand years, and just needed replenishing. As soon as I turned on the shower a blast of warm steam hit me in the face before the water burst through the remnants of a heating charm. We'd have to replenish the water tank every few days.

Word that the showers and toilets were working spread fast through the ship, and my companions retreated to their individual rooms of choice in order to wash away the grime and sweat of the last few days, since we had left the villa under the warm Italian sun nearly two days ago. It had been almost a non-stop fight to survive since then, especially for me...

I took the chance to head up top alone, out into the cavernous dock, to double-check my ward runes were holding and doing their job. They were. I had to trust the memories in my head, yet in some ways I was still only fifteen-nearly-sixteen, trying desperately hard to

reconcile the influx of devastating thought I'd dropped on myself from the future. Futures. All was shipshape, so to speak.

Inside the armoury I brushed the dust off the mythrill weapons and scanned the locked chest that was bolted to the far wall. There were runes running the length of it, and as I ran my fingers across the coarse wood they flared to life, even after all this time, in a range of electric-blue, shocking-purple, emerald-green... all flowing across the wood. A combination lock.

"What's the code? What's the code?" I wondered aloud. It was there on the tip of my mind, just like so many other thoughts and memories, but I couldn't pull it out of the haze. I stroked the chest, the runes were warm... Nope, no good.

I knew what was in the chest.

Crystals were in the chest.

Power crystals that slotted into the back of the dozen or so cannons out on the main deck. They'd need charging with starlight after all this time, but the basic design of the crystal allowed for concentrated bursts of weaponized-starlight to be fired up to five miles through clear twilit sky. Yeehaw, indeed, ladies and gentlemen. Light that could cut clean through anything, save rune-wards of similar strength – like the ones I'd placed around this ship.

A lopsided, probably comically-insane, grin spread across my face as I stepped back out onto the main deck and turned to climb the stairs up to the ship's control column. The memories were sliding into place, and before all was said and done I would be one helluva force to be reckoned with. I had to thank my future selves that much, at least – they knew how to fuck shit up.

On the upper deck there was, as expected, a fine coating of dust and debris from the last idle ten-millennia or so. In the centre of the deck stood the ship's wheel, gilded in mythrill and still shiny after all this time. The rest of the controls were dead, however, lifeless and seemingly silent. Raised control columns with various levers and

knobs – it was advanced magical technology, yet it looked like simple clockwork. I could get them going again, of course I could.

Flashes of years spent in the library here in Atlantis burnt across my mind. Years spent learning how this stuff all worked – how to fix it. Once upon a time I'd had designs to activate all the dead technology here in Atlantis and turn it upon Voldemort. It had been a bold plan, a reckless plan. The Dark Lord had anticipated it – his cunning and insight into my mind was matched only by my own into his. In the end, I had failed, because of the Infernal Clock...

"Tick-tock," I whispered, a hand on the ancient ship's wheel. It creaked in its joints as I spun it around, but a little bit of spellwork fixed that right up. "Tick-tock, tick-tock..."

I closed my eyes and pictured the Infernal Clock ticking slowly away deep, deep beneath this city. In a few weeks, Voldemort and I would race for that prize, we would rush headlong down into the realms below that even the Atlanteans failed to breach. Realms that had destroyed the world ten-thousand years ago.

Aw hell.

If there were any other way...

But there was not. Nope.

The Infernal Clock, in all its raw, untamed beauty, had to be put into play...

If the stakes weren't this high, then no one would give a damn. Yet who am I to make these choices? Choices that shape the fate of billions, time and time again...

For that first week in Atlantis, we did not venture beyond the confines of our ship, which underwent major restoration work in the days following the attack by the frasks.

It was such a static place, Atlantis, and barely any time seemed to pass at all under the constant twilight sky. There was enough work on the ship to keep everyone busy, including Jason and Grace – who took to examining various pieces of dead Atlantean technology in detail, admiring the detail and simplicity in devices that could do miraculous things. He was burning through the parchment and ballpoint pens he'd brought along.

I was in no real hurry, either. I could not be sure of Saturnia and Chronos, whatever they were, but all my other enemies had no way of knowing where I was, or how to reach me beyond the ward-rune curtain I had draped across the battleship. It had been a hectic, violent few weeks since I awoke at Privet Drive with the end of the world on my shoulders, and in that time there had been very little chance to stop and catch my breath.

It couldn't all be running from one place to the next, dodging spells and solving ancient mysteries.

I relished that week of simple, honest spellwork – fixing the rigging on the ship, cleaning out the mechanical aspects of the ship, getting her ready for launch – if launch became necessary. I had ventured out as far as the dock in order to place a few glass vessels on the ground every night, spelled and scorched with runes designed to catch starlight – raw light energy. It would be used to fuel half the crap we came across here in Atlantis. I had collected quite a lot of the highly explosive substance over the course of the week.

But, once again, there was no rush. Rushing would come later.

A week here was nothing – it wasn't even a full day back home, back in the real world. At best I'd left Dumbledore behind in that cavern in Italy twelve hours ago. There was plenty of time, time I was now using to recover, to plot my next moves carefully. With Saturnia and Chronos unaccounted for, I had to proceed with care against Voldemort. I didn't know what those two wanted with Atlantis, but I could hazard a guess it had something to do with the Infernal Clock... and the realms it guarded.

That's where the true power of the Lost City could be found. Not within it, but beneath it and beyond it.

At breakfast on the seventh day, I emerged clean-shaven and looking almost whole, after a week of eating right and sleeping more than five minutes a day. I joined the others in the ship's galley, joined them amongst the smell of frying bacon and freshly squeezed juice. We were burning through our fresh supplies, but then they'd just go off if we didn't.

And there was plenty of soup for when that happened.

"You're looking well, Harry," Tonks said, idly spinning her wand around a lock of her pink hair.

I lifted up my shirt and showed off my side. "Just pulled those damn stitches out," I said. "Check out the cool new scar."

Fleur winced. "Merde, eet still looks a bit raw."

I shrugged. "Stings a bit, too, but the skin's healed. Demon bitch who stabbed me thought she could keep me down – not this boy, no, ma'am."

"Does this mean you're up to something today?"

I grinned. "Perceptive, Tonks. Yes, yes it does. I was thinking of strolling through downtown and seeing what there is to see..."

"Monsters and mayhem?" Grace suggested.

"If we're careful, we can skirt around all the monsters in the shadows. The real monsters are in the big, black tower in the heart of the city, anyway, and that's easy enough to avoid... for now."

"What are you expecting to find?" Jason asked.

"Stores of ancient wealth – of knowledge lost to the wastelands of time, my friend. Stuff that'd make even old Merlin walk away very, very slowly, lest he disturb the quiet fury of the Old World." I chuckled.

"There's wonder here, you know, not just monsters. One means nothing without the other anyway."

"Wise beyond your years, kid?" Tonks asked, leaning over to scuff up my scruffy hair.

"Ha, something like that, I guess."

"So when do we leave?" Fleur asked. "Despite ze risk, eet will feel good to get off zis ship."

I clicked my teeth together a few times in thought. This was the best move to make now. So far things had progressed at a faster pace than previous lives. I had to buck the trend here and place myself a few steps ahead. I had to start creating some real chaos, start my campaign against the Dark Lord in earnest...

"Get your running shoes on sweetheart," I told Fleur. "We leave in an hour."

An hour later we left, all five of us. I went first out through the docks into the motionless air of Atlantis. Then went Jason and Grace. Tonks and Fleur came last, eyes darting side to side and wands at the ready.

We all carried a weapon from the ship's armoury – I couldn't keep referring to it as the 'ship', either, she needed a name, a proper name... I couldn't recall what I'd named her in other lives... - slim rapiers for the ladies, a longer sword for Jason, and my trusty battleaxe slung in a makeshift holster across my back. It was a little awkward carrying it like that, but I wanted to be able to use my wand and hanging it from my side left me in danger of gutting myself with any sudden movements.

Floating next to Jason and Grace was a single trunk, mostly empty, that held, amongst other things, our lunch. I'd be jamming it full of crap to take back to the ship. If I was to captain a pirate ship, and every nerve in my body screamed that I do so, then I guess this would be our first plundering mission.

"Alright, mateys," I said, as we exited the dock and made our way through the Shipyards. It was quiet, deathly quiet. "If me treasure map is correct," I tapped my scar, "then 'X' marks the spot three nautical miles to the southwest."

"What are you talking about?" Grace asked, perplexed.

Tonks smirked. "You're not a pirate, Harry."

"Yes I am. Now listen close, folks, because it's not all rainbows and daffodils out here... we're heading for where I think," I knew, "the main Atlantean treasury was built. There'll be a lot of stuff there I don't want Voldemort to even know exists. Some of it we're taking with us back to the ship – it'll take a few trips – the rest I'm going to blow up... I may not be a pirate, but how do you feel about terrorism?" My laughter didn't seem out of place at all.

"Terrorism, really?" Jason asked.

I shrugged. "Voldemort checks all the terrorist boxes, and from a certain viewpoint so do I. Neither of us belong to any military but our own – he's declared war against the wizarding world, I've declared war against him... I'm going to kill his followers to send a pretty strong message, one of my own ideological devising, and I'm going to do it by blowing shit up so the rest of his forces learn to fear me."

Jason nodded. "There's no internationally accepted definition of terrorism, but your actions do fit a number of United Nations resolutions that define certain acts as 'terrorist'." The young Muggle professor sighed, stroking the hilt of his sword. "Maybe you'd be better off describing yourself as a freedom fighter, Harry. You may even be one to the people in your world who oppose this Lord Voldemort. From what I understand, you have the moral high-ground in this fight."

A slight breeze whistled through the city streets as we moved amongst the dust and debris, skirting between overturned and rusted vehicles, passed mounds of sparkling mythrill rubble, heading southwest. I was trying to make it look like I didn't know precisely where I was going.

"I don't want to exterminate six billion or so non-magical folk, no," I answered Jason. "And I guess Voldemort's killing the innocent to prove a point, not me. Alright, if Tonks won't let me be a pirate, I guess I'll be a freedom fighter."

"The Chosen One..." Tonks said, with very little trace of humour in her tone.

And that was because it wasn't funny. Not at all. We all knew it. I had run that title into the grave more than once. Oh yeah, just shakin' things up a little, boss, can ya dig it?

It took the best part of an hour to reach our destination. It was only three miles, but we were slowed by the destruction in the city and – more than once – we paused to gaze at something particularly terrifying. Giant bones, all that remained of the fallen carcasses of creatures that defied explanation. The Shambling Bone-Men.

Even after all this time, even though I could subdue the majority of the demon horde sealed away beneath this city, I still shivered every time I saw another monstrous skeleton...

We crested a rise an hour before what would've been noon back home, and it gave us a commanding view of the lower half of the city. Voldemort's tower, with its eternal light atop, was a few miles away to the east, mixed in amongst the other skyscrapers and joined by sparkling silver bridges stretching from one rooftop to the next. I had to breach that complex before too long. It was the way to the Infernal Clock.

Before that though...

The street we were on curved down and around back towards the coastline and the barren, lifeless seabed beyond. There was the smell of old, stale salt on the air, rolling in off the vacant ocean. It made me think of moist dirt in a fresh grave, of all things. Damn... we were all going to die one day, that much was certain. Die and stay dead.

I welcomed that day with something akin to morbid relief.

The street widened into a large square complete with dead fountains and fallen statues of stony-faced men and women, the Atlanteans, dressed in robes cut fine. Most of them had been desecrated at some point, even torn down, yet it was clear that at some point in the long, distant past, this place had been a garden – a park. Dust lay thick over the earth, over soil so dry it squeaked underfoot.

"There we go," I said, pointing to a structure just beyond the garden square. "The first ever branch of Gringotts, although it was probably called something else back then..."

I was pointing toward a high-domed building about four hundred feet long and several storeys high. The windows were all smashed and broken, the brickwork looked ragged and slumped, yet there was a certain elegance about the place. A sense of establishment, of order and wealth, amidst the ruin of the whole world.

"The goblins were allies of the Atlanteans all those years ago," I said. "And, just like today, they administrated the banks and monitored the flow of wealth throughout the nation of Atlantis."

"They remembered more about zis than wizards did," Fleur said, no doubt recalling that day in Diagon Alley a few weeks ago, where I'd invoked an ancient, binding contact made between the goblins and wizards right here in Atlantis. The Claw of Ragnorak Unbroken.

"That's because they survived," I said. "They retreated underground as the Atlantean war raged on, sealed away all the wealth of the Old World – some of which they still have today, but not much – and hid like cowards as the world devoured itself."

"Hold on a minute," Tonks said. "You mean the goblins knew Atlantis existed? That is wasn't just a myth?"

I nodded. "Last laugh was on them, though. Most of their old gold and such they sealed away beneath this building here... and when the war came to an abrupt end Atlantis was blasted beyond the real world and into this limbo place. And here it's stayed for a very long time."

"That's incredible," Tonks said, shaking her head. "Why would they keep it a secret?"

"Because they are bound still by Old World magic," I said. "By treaties with wizard-kind stretching back so far... it would not be in their favour to have those treaties be called into question."

"But you're going to do something, aren't you, Harry?" Tonks looked wary. "You've got that look in your eye, the same one you had before unleashing that Demon's Light back in Italy."

I tilted my head and rolled my eyes. "That was a fun time, wasn't it? And yeah, I've got a plan, once we get back home."

"Do we want to know?" Fleur asked.

I shrugged. "Long story short, I'm going to overthrow the wizarding world before Voldemort does."

Tonks and Fleur exchanged a wry glance. They couldn't tell if I were serious or not. "Good luck with that," Tonks said eventually.

It was dark inside the old bank, yet as before torches containing old, flickering light flared to life on the walls – reacting to our very presence. The air was stale inside the bank, and we moved through it carefully, passed overturned desks and ruined counters, decaying chairs and through a sea of dust. Glass crunched underfoot, small weeds – brown, lifeless things – crunched as well.

Beyond the counters was an old mythrill security screen – still strong after all this time. It took all of us a few minutes of rummaging amongst the crap behind the desks and such to find a set of keys. Well, I made it take a few minutes, just for pretence, I knew where the keys were the entire time.

With the trunks still floating beside us, tied to Fleur's wand, we headed down the corridor in weak-light. Dark rooms and adjacent hallways were every few feet, yet I stuck to the path in front of me,

and came to a wider chamber containing a single large door of marble, cut from the very wall.

As we approached, old runes flared to life along the gateway entrance. Sharp, jagged slashes overlayed with a pointed fusion of impossibly bright colour,

The door was awaiting a code. And, wonder of wonders, it was there in my head. The work of more than one lifetime to advance into the room beyond this one...

"Just like in Italy," I said to the others. "Remember all those runes across the mosaic..."

I used my wand to tap the runes in sequence, speaking each one out loud in Old World Atlantean - a step before Latin – the oldest magical language in the history of the planet. And it hadn't really changed much over the ages.

I tapped the last rune in sequence and the doors groaned on ancient hinges, whined on flows of long-ago magic, and the joined stone slabs split down the middle, the runes faded, and the mighty vault swung open of its own volition. Air rushed into the sealed vault for the first time in ten-thousand years, rushed in so hard and fast that I stumbled forward a few steps, sucked into the vacuum.

I caught myself on the cool edge of the doorframe. This was all terribly exciting. I turned to my companions who watched me with baited breath, then I dropped them a wink and stepped into the darkness beyond the outline of the gateway, disappearing into a vault sealed over ten millennia ago...

Light flared around me as soon as I took the first step. Torches on the walls ignited with that same electric-blue light that permeated the entire city. It was brighter here than it was elsewhere, as this magic had rested undisturbed over all the long years. Frasks and worse had activated other parts of the city just by their presence, draining the spellwork. Here it was still fresh, untouched.

Beyond the door was a long, narrow corridor of smooth marble. We had to duck a little, as even all these years ago this structure had been made for goblin-folk. There was even a cart system that had echoed through the ages into every branch of Gringotts across the wizarding world today.

It was a simple thing here, however, without dragons. A single line of track and a small, white pod that would fit all of us quite comfortably waited just inside the entrance. I hopped into the cart and gestured for the others to do the same.

"All aboard, ladies and gentlemen, next stop fame and fortune."

"Are you sure it's safe after all this time?" Grace asked.

I nodded. "It's goblin-made, which actually counts for something, believe it or not. The magic is still solid after all this time. Don't worry, trust me, we'll be fine."

"Trust you," Grace said without much inflection, letting out a deep breath. "Trust Harry and we'll be fine." She shook her head. "How much of this are you making up as we go along, Mr. Potter?"

"This much," I said, and slammed my hand down on the control column of the cart. We shot off the mark like a bullet from a gun, zipping through the darkened marble corridor. "Oh we'll be fine," I assured my companions.

And we were.

The cart zoomed down the corridor, travelling just shy of about eighty miles an hour, and wound its way down through the multiple levels of the old Atlantean bank. Unlike Gringotts, there were no individual vaults – not in this part of the bank, anyway – as we were heading down into the city treasury. A vast storeroom containing all manner of sparkly pirate treasure.

The three trunks whizzed after us in midair, and the torches on the walls anticipated our arrival and flared to life ahead of us, lighting the

way. It didn't take long, all told, just under two minutes, to descend into the abyss.

The cart-pod came to a stop in a wide chamber that held a security checkpoint which, in yesteryear, would've been manned by an armed force of two dozen goblins and a dozen Atlantean wizards. Today it was deserted, quiet, dead... A large spherical door bulged outwards along the far wall, seemingly built into the very marble surrounding it. A ring of torches ignited around this entrance, as familiar runes began to flow across its surface.

I approached the door and started touching runes with my wand, muttering under my breath as I did so. This lock took some time, almost ten minutes to decipher from the torn memories in my head, and the others took a moment's rest on the trunks as I worked.

"Is this it, Harry?" Tonks asked. "Any further to go?"

I shook my head, tapping the runes faster now. "Nope, this is it. Remember the hundred-thousand galleons a month I promised you?"

"Yeah."

I took a step back as all the runes glowed bright yellow and vanished. The final door guarding the vault shimmered and disappeared as if it had never been... it simply faded away. Beyond lay a sight most handsome to behold.

"Well, it's payday."

"Dear Merlin..." Tonks breathed.

Terrible choices have terrible prices... maybe that's why I've hoisted the black flag and chosen the blood-stained path of vengeance.

The vault... was fit to burst.

It still sent a rush through me every time I saw it, every time I considered the possibilities.

As the lights came on, it became clear just how wealthy the Old World had been, and how much of that wealth the goblins had seized during the height of the Final War, how much they had sealed away – almost forever.

"Is that... all gold?" Jason asked.

"Every last piece," I said.

"But there's... I mean there's..."

It was one of those spaces that was bigger on the inside than out – a popular trick here in Atlantis – and within, as the lights flared to life along the breadth and depth of the vault before us, within was the treasure of a once-proud nation, of the most advanced nation ever to grace the Earth.

Towering piles of gold forty-feet high disappeared behind one another, rising higher and higher in perfect cones. There were large potato-style sacks overflowing with precious coin, as well, disappearing farther back into the expanded vault than we could see. There were rare stones mixed amongst the gold, and piles of rare stones all on their own. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds... magical stones, shining in the light, reflected in the wide-eyed stares of my companions.

"Arry, there is more gold here than in all of Gringotts," Fleur said.

"And then some," I agreed. "What couldn't a person buy with this much treasure?"

Jason, ever the clever one, was already doing the math. I could almost hear his mind whirring through all possible outcomes of this much accumulated wealth. "This much gold... it could collapse world economies," he said.

"Think bigger," I whispered, yet my words echoed down into the vault, down amongst the cold, cruel stacks of shiny swag and plunder.

Jason licked his lips. "Those diamonds are the size of footballs." He pointed his shaking hand at the nearest stack of riches. "You could flood the market with this, you could shut down nations... you could buy nations, Harry. Jesus Christ, you just made yourself the richest man in the world!"

I nodded. "But the thing is, there's so much wealth here that it becomes kind of worthless, doesn't it?" I let out a low, tired laugh. "That's why I'm going to blow it all up."

"Really?" Grace spun to face me. "Really?"

"Yeah – but feel free to take whatever you want – we'll load up the trunks now, come back for more over the next few days, and dump it all in the enlarged holds back on the ship. I'm taking enough to fight a war... or two... but no more."

Tonks was staring into the vault, amidst the stacks of gold and gemstones. "What's that on those pallets? Those look like bricks of silver."

I followed her gaze. "Ah... well. Now that's something special, isn't it? Something that doesn't exist back home, not for ten-thousand years. Those pallets, several dozen of them, contain quite a few tonnes of raw mythrill. Absolutely priceless, the lot of it."

"You going to blow that up, as well?" Jason asked. He had been stunned into silence for a few minutes.

"No, we'll be taking all of that with us."

It was slow work, but easy work, once we combined the trunks and magic and set up a neat delivery system for the gold. Each of the trunks was big enough on the inside to hold nearly two-hundred thousand gold coins, each one bearing the ancient symbol for eternity on one side, and a mint date on the other.

A quick bit of magic had the coins flying through the air in thick streams of gold directly into the trunks, filling each one up in about

the time it took us to sit back and eat our lunch. The real effort came from heading back an hour through the city to the Shipyards, dumping the mounds of coins in the expanded hold of the ship – which would take an awful lot to fill – and heading back down into the vault.

I went back and forth every time with one other, usually Tonks or Fleur, and Jason and Grace stayed together at the vault for the first day, examining all they wanted, conducting their studies, before they decided to head back to the ship whilst I continued to siphon the gold, jewels, and mythrill bricks from within the old bank.

After two days of this, stopping only once to sleep, the hold of the Atlantean battleship was nearly fit to burst with gold coin and stacks of the light mythrill bricks. I had more than enough for what I intended back in the real world, more than enough to buy and sell people, Ministries, and fund my own private army.

It was Fleur that came with me on the last trip down to the vault, and on this occasion only one trunk followed us silently through the city. Tonks had stayed behind at the ship to prepare dinner with Jason and Grace, as we were all weary after shifting some several million gold coins.

The pod-cart took us back down into the vault and even after all we had taken, it barely looked as though we'd made a dent in the mass of riches and treasure that remained within the dark, lonely, cavernous space. I kicked open the trunk I'd brought with us and removed the contents carefully, placing half a dozen glowing objects down amongst the piles of gold and jewels.

"You are really going to destroy zis place, 'Arry?" Fleur asked, eyeing the small vessels of starlight with distrust. She had already seen firsthand the damage raw starlight could cause. It had flung us into this world, after all.

I nodded, checking all the runes were in place on the glass containers holding the pale, softly glowing liquid. This stuff didn't carry the same kick as the stuff I'd collected back home, but it was still plenty strong... more than strong enough to bury the old bank forever.

"Think of me as a cleaner cleaning up the madness left behind by the Old World," I said.

"Okay..."

"Atlantis is a terrible, terrible place, Fleur. Full of things better left forgotten, better left blown to pieces... but Voldemort is here, he found his way across the abyss, and I have to do all I can to make sure he gets as little advantage as possible from the city, because he is already damn-near unstoppable."

"You 'ave to fight a war, oui?"

"Yes, that's what I gotta do."

Instead of taking the cart-pod back to the surface we walked up the tunnel, planting another starlight vessel every two-hundred feet or so. I had brought twenty containers of the glowing liquid, almost all I had collected over the last week, and each one was inscribed with runes which connected it to the others. I was laying a network of interconnected bombs, all linked, all awaiting a final joining rune that would detonate the lot.

I was looking forward to blowing something up. A week of rest and recovery was all very well, but it did get rather dull after a while.

With the last of the starlight bombs laid in the lobby of the old bank, Fleur and I retreated to a safe distance half a mile away, back up top of the rise that looked down into the square and out over the dried-up ocean beyond. All of the dark buildings below, dotted here and there with flickering cerulean lights, looked dead and empty.

"Zis city must 'ave been most beautiful, once upon a time," Fleur said, as I removed a final piece of shaped glass from the trunk and drew a single, complex rune across its glazed surface. The glass was of the same material I had fashioned the starlight vessels from, and as such was just a piece of the whole – a piece that could create a vital link back to the rest.

"Once upon a time," I agreed. "The four most dangerous words in the whole wide world. Right after 'I've got an idea...' and just before 'No way this could go wrong'."

"You are sometimes too cynical, 'Arry."

I felt confident enough to hold Fleur's hand, standing alone as we were in this awful wasteland of forever. She squeezed my fingers with genuine affection and I held up the joining rune on the piece of glass before us both. The rune I'd drawn still smoked from the heat of its creation.

"Would you like to do the honours?" I asked.

Fleur seemed taken aback. "You mean... blow up ze bank?"

"All you have to do is tap your wand against the rune and whisper its name... Swy-vrat."

"I... I don't know if I should."

I brushed Fleur's beautiful hair back behind her shoulders, exposing her neck, and stepped forward to plant a soft kiss on her pale, inviting skin, just over her pulse. The rush of doing such a thing was intoxicating, invigorating... I whispered into her ear, "Fear is good, sweetheart, fear is necessary. But sometimes, especially these times, you've just got to close your eyes and hope for the best."

"'Arry, I..." Her voice trailed away.

"I know, none of this is easy, least of all whatever feelings you and I may share, but Voldemort cannot win, not this time. There's no going back this time..."

My heart was pounding in my ears, my stomach was in knots. I was so close to whispering the truth, to have it all laid out before me, to bear my soul and watch Fleur flee from me... but either she wasn't ready to hear the answers, or she heard something in my voice that made her act, because...

Fleur tapped the sheet of glass with her wand and whispered the ancient word that triggered a flash of light so dazzling that we had to turn away.

For a second the twilight sky turned to day, just a second, then a wave of raw heat and energy knocked us back a step. The shockwave from the explosion was deafening, world-shattering, as the sound wave rippled outwards and the old bank, as well as several surrounding buildings, were annihilated in the space of two, desperate seconds.

"Merde, merde, merde..." Fleur swore under her breath over and over again. She rocked back and forth on her heels, unable to believe what she had done.

Great chunks of flaming rubble were thrust high into the sky, trailing white fire and slamming down into the city below, crashing through old buildings and tearing through the mythrill shells as if it were tinfoil. Starlight was powerful stuff, alright, and this had only been a few litres of the deadly mix.

"Once upon a time," I said, my voice lost below the shock and roar of the apocalypse going on down below. We could smell burning stone, scorched ash. The gold and jewels in the vault would have been vaporised. "Once upon a time, I had this idea, an idea to unmake time and save the world..."

Fleur couldn't hear me, not over the continued explosions from below. She watched wide-eyed, gripping my hand hard enough to cut off the circulation.

"Once upon a time I set the world on fire using my own soul as tinder to keep you all safe, Fleur. And there was no way it could go wrong, of course not."

I was Harry Potter. This was just another day at work, another day of the better-left-forgotten. A river of flame surged out over the square below, over fallen statues and dry soil – white flame, as hot as the sun. I watched my handiwork devour a small part of this once-great city.

"But everything did go wrong, because I had an idea, once upon a time." I shook my head. "And now, Fleur, now... I'm damned for it."

A/N: Oh yeah, oh yeah... BAM-BAM-BOOM! I advanced the story nine days in a single chapter. The scene has mostly been set for Atlantis, and it's time we got down to some thrillin' and killin', don't ya think? Plot is coming together nicely, and although everything may still seem a little murky, I reckon I'm going to pull this off. Review damn it!

My exams are three weeks away, so there will NOT be another update before then. No, no, no... well, I don't know. After exams, though, I got five months in which to write. Expect the update rate to skyrocket from December onwards...

Also, anyone got any ideas for the name of the ship? I'm supposed to be all creative and shit, but I'm drawing a blank here. HMS Kickass does have a certain ring to it after a few beers, oh yes, but I'm not really feeling it, no, so suggest away, folks.

All the best,

Joe

Chapter 22 – Of Harry and Voldemort

She collapsed with a flag in her hand;
A flag white as snow
A hero of war, is that what they see?
Just medals and scars
So damn proud of me...

~Rise Against

"You are still here?"

"I want to see it end."

"...So do I."

"You did it? You actually did it?" Tonks was on deck as Fleur and I arrived back at the partially restored battleship. Jason and Grace hung back as the Auror stood before me, blocking my path.

"Well, technically, Fleur did it..."

"Harry, that explosion lit up the whole sky! You say You-Know-Who is only a few miles away, what's he going to think about this? I thought you were keeping a low profile?"

I shrugged. "Voldemort... will think whatever Voldemort thinks. There's no way he'll tie this to me, to us, not yet. But I want him worried, I want him to wonder what else is here in Atlantis, what could cause such devastation. I want him to contemplate the fact that he could be sitting on a time bomb, that at any moment this city could explode... and then I want him to know it was me."

"Harry—"

"I want him to know that Harry Potter is out for fucking vengeance." I unclipped the battleaxe from my back and tossed it aside. It thunked

against the deck, punctuating my resolve. "For all he's hurt, for all he will hurt. For Sirius, Tonks, for my parents and all the rest. If for nothing else that the bastard has been trying to kill me for as long as I've been alive." And then some.

"But you can't just destroy—"

"Who's going to stop me?"

"You should stop yourself! If Dumbledore were here—"

I shook my head. "Dumbledore is not here, Tonks. And this is my war, my fight – if you want to stop me, please try, but I don't think you do. What would all that wealth do in the wrong hands? Even in my hands it's dangerous, especially in my hands..." I sighed. "Yet to have Voldemort claim it? No, not ever. I'm sorry if you disagree."

Tonks took a moment before replying. "I don't disagree, Harry, but you're not even... you're just too..."

"Too what?" I glanced around at my companions. Fleur stood by my side, her eyes still wild from the heat and haze following the bank explosion. A cool breeze, tasting of old salt, whistled through the enormous dock doors. "Too young? Too young to make these choices?"

"No," Tonks said, choosing her words with care. "Too... crazy, Harry. Somehow you've got all this knowledge, all this power, and you use it... with very little care to the consequences."

"I'm more aware of the consequences than anyone alive," I said in a deadly whisper. My face grew hard, my patience was slipping. Crazy? "As always, you'll just have to trust me."

"You ask a lot for trust, 'Arry," Fleur said, her tone carefully neutral.

"What if that's not good enough?" Tonks said. Her hair and her eyes had been storming through a variety of exasperated colours. She was stunningly beautiful in all of them, always and in all ways. "What if

you should be called into check, Harry? What if, as your friend, I need to stop you from doing something stupid...?"

And there it was, I suppose. It all came back not to trust, not even to fear, but to that terrible, awful loyalty I somehow inspired in those closest to me. Time and time again my actions got people, good people like Tonks, killed, and yet they all still died for me. Died for Harry fucking Potter. Willingly.

But Tonks couldn't stop me. None of them could. It was Voldemort – the king-high bastard of the lot – that could stop me. Not defeat me, no, but kill me. He could end me. Even then I just reset my soul back eight years – not anymore – but even then...

"Every move I make is calculated," I said. "Every action I take is thought out long and hard beforehand." How best to explain it? "These last few weeks, Tonks, since I left Privet Drive. Think of all I've done, how it's all played out. I've evaded more than one worldwide manhunt, I've uncovered a city lost ten-thousand years ago, and I've just destroyed a potential source of inexhaustible gold for Voldemort." I let my shoulders fall, my posture relax. "I've done more in a fortnight than the Ministry will ever do in this war, Tonks. And you have to remember, at all times, that we are at war."

"I know that, Harry."

"Do you?" I shrugged. "Then what's the problem? You knew I was going to blow up the bank."

Tonks opened her mouth to reply, but then her face paled and she rushed forward, placing a hand on my shoulder and staring at my forehead. "Harry, you're bleeding!"

I frowned and took a step back. It was only then that I realised that my scar, that monstrous lightning bolt, was on fire. Pain, raw and untamed, sped like a brand through my skull. The scar had split along its ridged seam and a thin line of blood was beading just above my eyebrow.

I had to laugh. The pain had been damn-near indistinguishable from my constant headache. "Voldemort is extremely pissed off," I said, glancing back to Tonks. "Job well done, Harry, I'd say. No?"

"Again and again... until I get it right."

I was going to come face to face with Voldemort soon.

Very soon.

It was all part of the Big Plan. A plan that had seen me cast across the blasted wastelands of time, that had been years in the making, that left little margin for error. I got all warm and tingly thinking about it.

"You are smiling, 'Arry," Fleur said, sitting next to me up on the top deck of our ship. We gazed out over the docks and through the slipway doors, out at the barren, lifeless seabed beyond that disappeared over an azure horizon. "Why is zat?"

"I was just thinking about Voldemort," I said, staring out into that eternal nothing. There was a subtle difference between nothing and nothingness. The latter was far worse – far, far worse... I drifted through it quite often.

"Then why are you smiling?"

"Because I have a plan, sweetheart, a plan to give the Dark Lord all that he desires from Atlantis... only to tear it away. I'm smiling at the anger, the frustration, the raw untempered hate Voldemort will feel once I play my hand. Son of a bitch won't know what hit him."

Fleur and I were holding hands. It was a calming, subtle gesture of our somewhat unspoken relationship. We'd been forged by blood and by circumstance over the last few weeks, nearly a month. More than enough time to fall in love, to fall stupidly head-over-heels once more. Was it love I felt for Fleur? Did it matter after all this time? Her presence was more than enough.

"You really know what you are doing, oui?"

"I wouldn't have brought you here if I didn't, Fleur." I was doing a bit of quick math in my head, factoring in the ten days we had now been in Atlantis. "Today is my sixteenth birthday, by the way."

Fleur squeezed my hand and leaned over, her blonde hair flickering through the twilit glare of forever, and kissed me just on the corner of my mouth. Her lips were full, moist, and they lingered a whole five seconds. "Happy birthday, 'Arry Potter."

I felt sixteen just then. In that one simple moment. But moments are brief, moments are eternally short-lived.

I was beyond sixteen.

I was years beyond sixteen. But in so many ways I was only just sixteen. More and more, though, new memories surfaced, slotted into place within the ruined mess of my mind. I was beginning to feel more of the deaths I'd died, more of the lives I'd lived, oh can you dig it, and perhaps sixteen became just a number – in truth I was ageless.

Ageless.

And although that terrified me, it felt right. Ageless and smilin', darlin'. Yeehaw, yeehaw!

I took a sip from the last of a few beers I'd managed to sneak into the trunks without Tonks noticing. A bottle of cool Stella Artois, the glass frosty, resting on an ancient control panel that I hadn't managed to fix yet. I needed to scavenge a few parts from the other defunct battleships rotting away nearby.

"It's quiet here, isn't it?" I said, running my tongue over the corner of my mouth. The kiss had been brief, oh so brief, but, as always, enough to set the heart racing. "Feels right..."

"'Arry," Fleur said, with more than a hint of delighted frustration. "Are you being intentionally dense or just teasing me?"

I blinked. "Hmm?"

"Please kiss me back, 'Arry Potter."

"Oh..." I'd missed that opening entirely, it seemed, but if Fleur was willing. "Okay."

We kissed – hard.

We made out.

All my thoughts of war and of time faded away as she moved into my lap, her weight sending raw shocks of desire sweeping through me. My hands ran up her back, under her blouse, as she cupped my face and our tongues did a neat little dancing act.

Happy birthday, Harry, I thought, shoving myself forward on the chest we had been seated on so Fleur could get a better grip, swinging her leg over until she was astride me. My hands fell to the waistband of her pants, her lower back, and I slipped my undamaged right hand under and down. Yeehaw... Fleur's underwear felt soft... silky-smooth.

And all the while we kissed – we kissed the way two people kissed after time apart, after longing had become more than desire, after desire had become more than simple need. We kissed with passion, I suppose, and Fleur let my hands roam. It was a great feeling, a needed feeling, and always beyond words. Words were poor excuses for moments such as this...

After a few minutes Fleur placed a hand on my chest and gently pushed me back, still straddling me, her breathing hard – matching my own – and smiled. "We 'ave to stop, 'Arry, for now..."

I took a deep breath. "Oh but why?"

Fleur giggled. "Too much of a good thing, oui... and I do not want Tonks, Grace, or Jason to happen upon us up here."

I took the initiative and wrapped my arms around the beautiful woman in my lap and we embraced and kissed a final time. I was more than a little happy to feel a shudder run through Fleur as our lips parted. If she felt even an ounce of the feelings that rushed through me... I'd done my job.

"There iz something different about kissing you, 'Arry Potter," Fleur said, tasting her lips with her tongue. "Something... different."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Eet feels... well, eet feels..." She met my eyes and shrugged. "Do you promise not to laugh?"

"Always."

Fleur hesitated, biting her bottom lip. "Timeless," she finally said. "You feel timeless, 'Arry." She shook her head, her hair tickled my nose. "That sounds stupid, but... does eet make any sense?"

"Oh some," I said, careless and carefree. "Nothing to worry about, is it?"

"Non..." Fleur patted my chest, raking her nails over my heart. "I suppose not." A moment fell between us, one of those comfortable moments of shared thought that are impossible to describe. "Well, shall we head downstairs and prepare ze dinner?"

"Sure we can't make-out some more?"

"Plenty of time for zat later."

"Right... well you may want to do up your blouse then." I smirked. "Black lace, my dear Fleur Delacour, well I never..."

Fleur glanced down and a small, playful blush rose in her cheeks. She slapped me gently and redid the buttons on her floral top, concealing her considerable, flawless breasts. "How did you manage zat?" she said. "I felt nothing."

I laughed. "Quick hands, chérie. And more determination than I've ever shown in trying to stop Voldemort." Well, almost. I couldn't recall ever dying for Fleur Delacour's breasts... but I reckon I would. Yes, sir, I reckon that'd make more sense than some of the deaths I'd died.

Probably be a helluva lot more fun, too.

"You damn the consequences, right, because you can't afford guilt and power."

"No, that's not it... you cannot have power without guilt, because only the guilty understand the cost of power. Do you understand?"

"No..."

"I'm sorry, Harry, but you will."

I'd tried going insane.

I'd tried love.

I'd tried begging for help.

I'd tried doing it on my own.

I'd tried saving the world in so many ways and across so many days, that it'd all become somewhat of a haze.

"Take a look at the lawman... beating up the wrong guy'." I shouldn't have to justify my actions after so long. My way was the only way. "Oh, man, wonder if he'll ever know... da-da-da... he's in the best selling show'." Any other option led to ash and dust and the end of the world. "Is there life on Mars? Da-da... Is there life on Mars?"

"What are you doing, Harry?"

"Entire worlds are wondering that, Tonks," I said, falling out of my memories. The mirror in my cabin must have been charmed to lie,

because as I shrugged on the last of my undamaged fancy suit jackets, I didn't look half-bad. "I'm getting ready."

"For what?"

Pain. "We're going to go blow up a library. A very special library containing knowledge best left in ashes." Perhaps the few days since blowing up the bank had been good to me. Fleur had definitely been good to me. I was feeling ready for what was to come. Time to get the show on the road and all o'that...

"What about—?"

"Voldemort?" I could smell something good cooking in the galley. Bacon strips, maybe, and pancakes. It was Grace cooking, then. She put my canned soup efforts to shame. "I'm... I'm kind of counting on him noticing this. The library is practically on his doorstep anyway."

Tonks took a step forward into the room, placing a hand against my forehead. "Hmm... no fever. You feeling okay, Harry? For a moment there it seemed like you were actually hoping to run into Voldemort."

I thought of the days to come, of what had to be done. I had to go it alone soon, had to leave Fleur and Tonks, Jason and Grace, behind. Not for good, but for a week or two... or more. Depending on how long it took me to convince Voldemort of my intentions. And provided he didn't just kill me on the spot. He'd hesitate, though, I was sure of it. My memories were telling me he would hesitate... long enough.

One helluva gamble – maybe yes, maybe no... but no guts, no glory. Although there had never been much glory in the war I had to fight.

"I have a plan, Tonks, and we're going to discuss it over breakfast."

"Am I going to like this plan?"

"Not one bit."

"Ah."

It was bacon and pancakes, bless Grace's little heart. The young Muggle research assistant had taken to cooking as something normal in a world of impossibilities. She and Jason spent their days together, collecting and writing notes on everything from the mythrill shards scattered throughout the docks to the strange purple sand down on the edge of the slipway, blowing in off the barren sea. It was a lot for them to absorb, even without the overarching fear of monsters and war that bothered the rest of us.

Fleur sat opposite me and tangled her feet up with mine under the table. Even through her jeans I could feel how smooth, how elegant, her legs were... Damn I was going to miss this after today.

"So Harry has a plan," Tonks said. "One I'm not going to like. Harry?"

The quiet conversation ceased and I finished a strip of bacon before clearing my throat, four pairs of eyes regarding me with near-dreadful curiosity. "We're going to float one of the trunks over to the Atlantean library, stock up on priceless tomes and invaluable knowledge, then blow it up as I did the bank."

Jason frowned, Grace blinked, Fleur untangled her feet from around mine and Tonks sighed.

"I would really appreciate it if you stopped destroying the ten-thousand year old artefacts, Harry, I really would," Jason said. He cast a glance at Tonks as her hair flickered between fiery-red and electric-blue. He was always fascinated by Tonks. If it wasn't for my budding relationship with Fleur, I may have been a touch jealous of his attention. "There is so much we can learn from this city."

"Exactly," I said. "And as it stands, the motherfucking Dark Lord Voldemort is in a better position of learning it than we'll ever be." I chuckled. "Heh, unless anyone is willing to tear their soul into seven or so pieces and create a rift back to the real world? No? Didn't think so."

"But it's a library, Harry," Grace said. "You can't—"

"Can and will," I said. "I don't want to, no. But there's more at stake than a few books, believe me."

Tonks tapped a fork against the side of her plate. "You said I wouldn't like this plan? I'm all for stopping Voldemort getting his hands on forbidden magic, Harry."

I nodded with half a grin. "Yeah, but the plan kind of goes downhill from there... You see, pretty much as soon as we enter the library, Voldemort's going to know we're there."

Tonks took a deep breath. "I don't like this plan."

"Told you so." And I'm not even telling you the worst part...

"May I suggest against entering ze library then, 'Arry?" Fleur asked.

"You may." I laughed. "But this is a good plan. The library is locked, you see, and he's been trying for weeks to get in. The Death Eaters, too. So when I come along with my wicked flask of starlight and an unrivalled understanding of Atlantean runes, it's going to piss him off terribly. Least of all the fact that I'm here in Atlantis at all." A look of shock rippled across the Dark Lord's face. Ha-ha. "Then, while I hold him and the Death Eaters back you guys are going to grab as many books from the shelves as you can. Then leg it back here."

I let the plan sink in. The plan I wanted them to follow, not exactly the plan I had in mind.

"Question," Tonks said. "Why don't we just portkey back? Save us all some grief, I'd imagine. I know Apparation doesn't seem to work here, don't ask me why, but a portkey..."

I was shaking my head. "Portkey's work on points of origin and of destination. Atlantis has neither."

Tonks frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Using a portkey here, in the Lost City, a city straddling the border between the real world, the next world, and the realms of the Fée and

Forget..." I shivered. "At best, you'd be liquefied. At worst, you'll live long enough to wish you were liquefied."

"Portkey iz out then," Fleur decided.

"This is actually taking the fight to Voldemort, isn't it?" Tonks asked after a long moment. "Acting and not just reacting."

"That's what we do," I said. "What we're here for, after all is said and done."

"Not just gold and battleships?" Grace asked.

"Voldemort wants what's here – the knowledge, the power, the army... If Voldemort wants it then I very much want to take it from him." It was that simple. Bitter, petty war, oh yes?

"And you can hold him off, can you?" Tonks asked. "It took Dumbledore to duel him to a standstill in the Ministry, Harry. Dumbledore!"

"I've come into my own since then," I said, and the harsh truth there had shattered worlds. "Voldemort won't know what hit him." I was done explaining. What I was about to do, the pain I was about to sacrifice, more than justified the lies. "We leave in an hour – come if you want, ladies and gentlemen, or stay here. Either way, today I battle the Dark Lord. Dum-dum-dum!"

Just shy of an hour later found me sitting on the edge of my cot in the captain's quarters. I had just finished shining my shoes, straightening my shirt, and charming my suit with a few spells and magical protections that would see me through the day. In the mirror once more, I looked at myself, pushing my glasses up the bridge of my nose. It was a god-awful day, and I did not recognise the sixteen year old boy that glared back at me in the reflection.

The eyes I recognised.

The eyes belonged to a man – to men – a lot older than sixteen. I was young in body alone. Everything else was old... worn... and so

very tired. I took a deep breath, readying myself for what lay ahead. Forgive me Fleur... Tonks... but this is the way it has to be done.

I could hear footsteps above me, up on deck, several pairs of boots milling around. Sounded like we were ready to go. I hesitated only once before reaching down into my battered and trusty old briefcase, leaning against the wooden wall of the cabin. From within I removed a letter of folded parchment, tied with an emerald green ribbon.

Fleur, it said across the front in my untidy script.

I stepped out of my cabin, across the narrow hallway, and into the quarters Fleur was using. It was clean inside, and smelt vaguely of strawberries and fresh rainfall. Or maybe that was just my cracked imagination. It felt like I was invading her privacy, so I quickly left the letter where she would see it on her pillow and made my way up and on deck.

I found all my companions there, ready to go. They stood silhouetted against the azure sky beyond the slipway, a single empty trunk floating next to them. Fleur was foremost in my mind, next to Tonks, smiling at me in that secret, special way. Jason and Grace gripped their mythrill weapons, the only real defence they had against the nightmare, and awaited my word.

"Well... who wants to go save the world?" I asked.

Tonks asked a better question. "How many Death Eaters does he have here, Harry? Do you... can you tell... through your scar?"

That malignant brand across my forehead twinged and twisted against my skull all the time now. I didn't need it to tell me of the extent of Voldemort's forces here. I'd found that out time and time again.

"Worst case scenario?" I asked. Tonks nodded. "Seven of his followers – Alecto and Amicus Carrow, Bellatrix Lestrange," that bitch would definitely be here, "Pettigrew, Thorfinn Rowle, Mathius Yaxley, and Gregor Travers. The rest are in Azkaban, the most unsecure prison in all of Creation, or unavailable at this time."

Tonks seemed taken aback. "Yaxley? Mathius Yaxley is a Death Eater?" she asked. "That's... he was a trainer at the Academy. Are you sure, Harry?"

"As I'll ever be. I also know he has planned with Voldemort to assassinate Rufus Scrimgeour and overthrow the Ministry. If we see him, best to put him out of all our misery. Actually, that's the rule for any Death Eater, okay."

"Right..." Tonks didn't sound certain.

I guess none of them, none save me and possibly Dumbledore, were at the point where the realisation sunk in good and hard that people were going to have to die for this conflict to end. So far there had only been a few opening shots, a few deaths – Cedric, Sirius – but soon more would fall. Soon Tonks would realise it was kill or be killed. Because neither can live while the other survives...

"If all goes according to plan, we'll be in and out before they know what hit 'em." That wasn't the plan, not really. Not for me. "And we'll deal the Dark Lord a solid blow, an effective shot..." I sighed. Shouldn't I be numb to the anxiety after so long? I guess no one, not even Harry Potter, Time Warrior, could steel themselves against the pain I knew was coming. "Lennon's on sale again... da-da..."

"What's that, Harry?" Jason asked.

"Nothing. Let's go, folks."

"Can the ends ever justify the means then?"

"That depends on the cost, my boy. To justify this... idea of yours, you would need to know the outcome of changing an impossible amount of variables."

"I'd have to predict time, yes, and anticipate the changes... it makes sense. I can do this."

"Yes, perhaps, but should you do it? Look at the cost Voldemort paid for his soul – will you pay the same or, Merlin forbid, worse?"

Downtown Atlantis was a mess. We strode through the bones of some fallen leviathan – a creature with a ribcage that had crushed two buildings and a skull with a jaw the size of Muggle aeroplanes. It wasn't actually apparent, at first, but soon enough the general outline of the beast became clear.

"Merlin, what is that?" Tonks asked. "Huge blackened bones?"

"It could fly, too," I said, before I knew I said it. Damn. Tonks shot me a look, as did Fleur, but neither of them said anything. Perhaps they knew this wasn't the best time, perhaps they just knew I wouldn't answer with the truth.

Jason was fascinated. "You know about these creatures, Harry?"

I nodded. "They don't exist anymore, just like this city. I don't know where they come from, all I know is it's from somewhere else. Realms beyond realms beyond realms, if you follow." The real world was surrounded by so many invisible ones. "To tell the truth, there was one back in Rome – not as big as this one – and that one Chronos brought through at your home, Fleur, but I dealt with them both."

"How do you deal with something this large?" Grace asked, wrapping her arms underneath her jumper.

I twirled my wand around in my good hand. "Fire usually does the trick. True fire. There are also runic incantations that can hold them back. They're bound by the rules of the world more than you'd think."

"Is this the army Voldemort is after?" Jason asked. "An army of creatures like this?"

"Yep." I shrugged. "Only a lot more vicious and angry than this old dead thing. Let's keep moving."

This was the first time we had entered the inner city since our abrupt arrival nearly two weeks ago now. Towering skyscrapers, pockmarked with ruin and some barely aglow with the currents of magic running beneath the city, rose on either side, piercing the twilight sky. We hugged the shadows, staying out of sight. I didn't want to draw the attention of anything just yet.

Apart from the dust and debris of fallen buildings, and apart from the bones and twisted stone, there were other signs of the last great struggle Atlantis had been through as we moved towards the dark tower next to the library. Half a battleship blocked one road – we lost fifteen minutes going around – but I was in no real hurry. It wasn't a friendly place I was walking towards, not at all. Was that a noose tightening around my neck?

"That must be it," Fleur said, as we rounded a bend in the road and came to a deserted plaza, strewn with rubble and caked in dust. "Ze pointed one, Arry, with ze large stone gates?"

"Yeah, that's it," I said. We stood almost at the foot of the tower that rose a clean mile above the city. Voldemort was in that tower. He was so damn close. My scar twitched, and I was thankful for the tumult of burning memory, despite the headache, that kept the Dark Lord from seeing into my mind.

"Someone has been here," Tonks said, pointing at the ground. "Footprints in the dust – heavy boots from the look of them."

"D-D-Death Eaters," I stammered. It felt good to mock something that was about to cause me a whole world of pain. "Stay close now, folks."

We approached the library from the right, avoided cutting across the empty plaza, and moved through the broken stone gates as silent as the night. A salty breeze whistled through the buildings, over the old bones and disturbed the dust. The library rose up before us several storeys high. It was a lot bigger on the inside, of course, like most of the places in the Lost City.

It was dark and quiet – it was always dark and quiet – yet I felt a sense of anticipation for what was to come now. I was committed to this course, for the good and the ill that would come from it, and now I held my wand at the ready as we passed beneath an ornate keystone arch, twisted with bracken, to enter the library proper.

Nothing more dangerous in the world than raw knowledge – and this place was raw enough to bleed.

"Stay quiet now," I whispered, my companions gathered close behind me. The solitary trunk full of starlight, the last of my batch, hovered just next to Fleur. "Tonks, if you could join me on point. I don't think we're alone here..."

Inside the library was a grand foyer, similar in style to the Entrance Hall at Hogwarts. Yet as was standard for this ruin of a city, the place was in shambles. Large thrusts of stone and marble had crippled the once-smooth floors. Banisters of swollen ivory stood twisted and broken. The furniture that remained was rotten through, collapsed, and time, that harsh mistress, had left her thick layer of wasted dust settled over everything.

If not for the boot prints crunching through the chaff and debris... well, this place would just be one of many in Atlantis that had not seen life in over ten millennia.

"This place looks a lot more... official than the rest of the city so far," Tonks said. "That was probably a security checkpoint."

"Atlantis prided itself on knowledge," I said. "There was nothing more respected, or more dangerous. Some of the old spell books here contain magics that could fry oceans."

"Right..."

I held my wand at the ready, keeping my scarred and somewhat useless hand close against my body. I could already feel the strength of the magic to come, the spells to cast. Voldemort would be here soon. Through the broken checkpoint there were failed ward screens, force shields designed to block entrance beyond the grand foyer.

They were a first line of defence against uninvited visitors. I strode through without giving them a second glance. All things being even, I had some right to this place, to the entire city. I had found the way here, the true way, left by Janus all those years ago. I had sacrificed time, lives, more than anyone, to be here. This was my city to protect, or to destroy, as I saw fit.

It was somewhat of a maze of corridors beyond the foyer, yet there was a clear path through the debris, and most of the torches on the walls were aglow with half-light. Soon enough, the way became clear, the corridors evened out, and we could hear voices up ahead. I raised my bad hand and motioned the group to stop.

"I keep telling you, we lack a specific catalyst, Thorfinn."

"Yes, well," a careful, quiet voice replied. "The Dark Lord tires of our failure, Gregor. He believes great lost magics reside beyond this door, and the grimoire, yet the outer shell remains intact despite our best efforts."

"It is the absorption properties in the stone." There was a sound like wood scraping against brick. "That silvery-clear metal that permeates everything here. There is simply no way we can force our way in. It requires a key."

I listened to the two Death Eaters around the corner with detached interest. I'd already seen these two dead more times than I could yet remember. At times it was hard to recall any feeling at all beyond mere apathy for people who had been lost, the good and the bad, so many times. Just another way I was as ruined as this city, I guess.

"Thorfinn Rowle and Gregor Travers," I whispered, low enough just for Tonks. "Stunners for now, okay. I need at least one of them alive."

Tonks nodded, watching me almost askance. She was worried and trying not to show it. "You go left I go right? Fleur, head down the middle?"

"Sounds like a plan. Jason, Grace, stay back until we give the all clear. These people don't have much love for non-magical folk."

It had only sounded like the two of them, yet there was only so much I could infer hiding just out of sight around the corner. My gut was telling me there was only the two of them, but instincts could be wrong... No, I trusted my instincts, despite however often I died, as they had kept me going beyond death, beyond eternity.

"Fuck it, let's go," I said a heartbeat later. If there were other silent figures, so be it. They would all fall to my wand.

Like most things I planned, based on long – oh so long – experience, we took down Rowle and Travers in a carefully executed flanking effort, just like clockwork.

I moved out from behind the outer wall and beheld a chamber of glowing Atlantean runes opening out towards a heavy sealed vault door, much akin to the one I had disarmed in the bank the other day. The floor had been cleared, there were scorch marks all over it from the Death Eaters' attempts to blast their way through something that could not be blasted.

Rowle and Travers weren't even facing my corridor as Tonks moved through on my right, a fierce red light flaring to life at the tip of her wand. It was an unconscious effort to fire two non-verbal stunners, even as Travers swirled on the spot, his own instincts telling him to duck.

The bastard managed a shield and Tonks' stunner went wide. Mine struck Rowle in the back of the head and he fell forward into the sealed wall, a sharp crack as his nose broke, and he slumped against the floor.

Fleur moved up as Travers ducked a follow-up curse from Tonks, his eyes wide and confused. He could not fathom how we were here, in Atlantis. He must have recognised me because his eyes narrowed and his wand swung in my direction. Fleur flicked her wand, "Stupefy," and Travers had to defend again before he could get a shot off.

"Throw down your wand or we start using the nasty stuff, buddy," I shouted over the din of sizzling magic and shattering shield charms. "You're outnumbered and your back's to the wall, Travers."

The Death Eater hesitated, his mind whirring through the calculations. There was no Apparating in Atlantis, the man had to know that, and no portkeys. The only way out was through the three of us, and despite what he may have heard, I was no pushover. Tonks in her Auror robes would also be giving him pause.

Travers sneered, keeping his wand raised against us. "Potter, isn't it? Harry Potter. The Dark Lord will be pleased to find you here."

I laughed. "Voldemort is going to be pissed as all hell that I'm here, you dolt, or were you trying to frighten me? Wand. Down. Now." I held the man's gaze. "Or I will kill you."

"You? Kill me?"

There was a hesitant uncertainty in his tone. Perhaps he believed me, for I was serious. The grin I flashed as I twirled my wand, the tip aglow with a festering purple light, was two parts crazy one part tragic.

Travers dropped his wand and raised his hands over his head. "What are you hoping to achieve here, Potter?" He glanced to Tonks and Fleur. "You've got a pet Auror but there is no Ministry here, kid. The only authority belongs to the Dark Lord!"

"Shut your stupid bearded face," I said, and with a flick of my wand the man collapsed in a heap against the floor. "That's two for Team Potter, aye."

Jason and Grace appeared from within the darkened corridor, pulling our floating trunk behind them. They eyed the two Death Eaters with cautious care, taking in the dark flowing robes and the grizzled, almost crazy, look of the two men.

"Keep an eye on them, Tonks, while I open this library."

A small vial of starlight poured into the seal and I tapped the runes in sequence as they appeared on the vaulted door. It had taken me years to figure out this code, years well spent. If I hadn't done it then Voldemort would have eventually cracked it himself. He was nothing if not intelligent. Intelligent and patient. Woe be to the world should he gain even a scrap of the knowledge behind this door.

On silent, ancient hinges the large stone doors separated, millenniums of dust sprinkling on down into the gap. Air rushed into the first – and last – truly Great Library, screaming on the breeze. The knowledge in here, of which only I could read at this stage in the game, made the Magnus Fontis look like the kiddie's table.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, kicking Thorfinn Rowle's wand out from under him as the doors came to a thudding halt. "Take a good look, because we're going to burn it to the ground."

Fleur and Jason stepped forward first, stepping into the light spreading up and outwards... to the far reaches of a chamber a lot bigger than it physically should be. Up and outwards into a chamber housing thousands of volumes, thousands of tiny little ways to end the world, all there for the taking. Oh boy oh boy.

"Merde, 'Arry," Fleur gasped. "Incredible."

"I'll know the future – I'll be able to change it."

"Yes, maybe. But if you do go back, if you do change the future, and Merlin, say you even destroy Voldemort and save all the poor souls that we've lost... what if they all just die in different ways."

"That's crazy."

"Is it? The reason you're going back is to stop them from dying. If you do succeed, then you would never have had the need to go back, you won't go back. It creates a contradiction, which is something the very laws of reality have never allowed."

"We'll see, won't we?"

"Well... I guess the universe will just have to make allowances for Harry Potter then."

"We could be in and out before he knows we're here, Harry."

"No, I want to see him. Get to work, guys. See that cage on the second level? Melt your way in and fill the trunk with all the books in there. That's the good stuff." I levitated Rowle and Travers into the main atrium of the library. "Quick, quick now."

"What about these two?"

"Travers I'll keep because he pissed me off. Rowle we're sending back to Voldemort to bring him on down here."

Fleur hesitated at the expanse of the space around us. Stacks about thirty feet high were crammed with books, supported by vast thin mythrill chains wrapped around a central chandelier hanging from the ceiling. A staircase of green marble rose up and around four levels, displaying further shelves and heavy stacks of magical texts.

It was the very centre of the room that drew attention, however. The space was as big as three quidditch pitches end on end, and the main atrium still held crippled petrified furniture – desks, reading tables, and such – yet there had been a surge from underneath the library sometime in the distant past.

The floor was cracked in the middle, a wide chasm about forty feet across stretched on and away under the foundations of the library. Sparks of soft silver light, of raw magic, floated up and out of the hole. At its precipice, just on the edge near the doors I had opened, we could all feel the heat emanating off the river of magic flowing beneath our feet.

I stepped carefully over to the edge of the chasm and gazed down into darkness. There was a flicker of silver light, a narrow line of fire, way down at the bottom – several miles away. I kicked a bunch of

loose rubble over the edge and heard it whistle through the nothingness. Oh yeah, this would do just fine.

"First things first..."

From within the hovering trunk I removed the last of the starlight, a whole case of the stuff, and spent a few minutes levitating the individual vials all around the library, packing them in close against the vast stacks of books. As I did this Fleur and Tonks, accompanied by Jason and Grace, broke into the cage on the second level and began to raid its contents.

There was a singular text in that cache, bound in human skin and infused with unique and terrible magic, that I would put to good use in the days to come. From memory, at least. That book had to burn.

Travers and Rowle were slumped next to one another just inside the main expanse of the atrium. I muttered a quick conjuring charm and thick cords of rope snapped tight around Travers's wrists and ankles, binding him up to his elbows and knees. Rowle I considered for a moment, sorely tempted to just slit the man's throat, but then that wasn't the plan.

"Ennervate..." I said, kneeling down on my haunches as Rowle's eyes flickered open and he shrugged off the confusion of the stunner. "Hello, Thorfinn Rowle. My name is Harry Potter."

"Potter...? Impossible." His hand slipped inside his dark robes, searching for his wand. "You cannot be here. Atlantis belongs to the Dark Lord."

"No. No it does not." I pointed my wand between the Death Eater's eyes. One curse is all it would take. With a thought I conjured a ball of green light at the tip, the colour of the Killing Curse, and just as cold. "Got a favour to ask, buddy. I need you to go get Voldemort and bring him down here."

Rowle blinked. "You... you jest, surely."

I shook my head. "There's the door – you know the way up through his tower, yes?"

"But the Dark Lord will end you, boy."

"Oh eventually, perhaps, but not today. Today is my show."

Rowle backed away on his hands and knees. He glanced back at the exit, into the antechamber with the glowing Atlantean runes dancing across the walls. "Potter... he will kill you."

Thorfinn Rowle was four or five times my age, a man who had lived and loved and chosen a cause he believed worth fighting for. Yet even some of the most trusted Death Eaters were not entirely bereft of a conscience. Yes, it was almost a guarantee that Voldemort would try to kill me before we were through. The man was giving me a chance to run, to flee, to die a later date.

"Just go get him, Rowle, and bring him on down here. He'll want me alive... to begin with, at least."

Rowle scuttled out of the room, casting a last glance over his shoulder as if fearing I'd come to my senses and would attack. I did not, and the man disappeared into shadows of ruin. He would be back all too soon. I gave him a few minutes head start, timing it all out in my head – time was everything – before proceeding with my plan.

"Two minutes, folks!" I hollered up through the library. "Get the trunk down here and be ready to run."

I turned to Travers, still unconscious with his limbs bound together in strong corded rope. I gazed from him to the abyss running through the heart of the room, back to him and then up to the heavy support chandelier hanging up above the sparkling precipice.

"You're the first to die, I guess," I said to Travers, to myself, to no one in particular.

I eyed the angles, tapping my wand against my palm, and then conjured a long piece of rope from the high chandelier. I tied one end

around the bonds holding Travers in place, and with the aid of magic wound the other end tight until the Death Eater was pulled along the broken floor right to the edge of the chasm. A good gust of wind would send him hurtling down to his death.

"What are you doing?" Grace asked, as she and Jason appeared ahead of Tonks and Fleur. The trunk now full of books hovered between them all.

"Creating leverage," I said. "Now let's see..." I kicked open the trunk and rifled through the piles of books. In the expanded space the few dozen tomes were spread out well, and I found what I was looking for quickly. "This book should not exist." I turned back to my companions. "This is the Grefaénicon, and it was gifted to Atlantis by a race of creatures from the Faé and Forget nearly eleven millennia ago. It's bound in human skin, and contains spells for summoning... for breaching gaps between worlds. If Voldemort had this..."

I gagged as a wave of nausea swept over me from just holding the book. It was evil. There was no better word for it. The creatures that had made it, that had presented it to the Atlanteans, had no concept of the damage it could do... or if they did, they deemed the Atlanteans capable of understanding the risk. They had understood, alright, and it had led to war between this world and the other.

"We burn it then," Tonks said. "Yes?"

I nodded. "Sort of." Travers was going to prove useful. I took the Grefaénicon, resisting the urge to scream as I touched it, and placed it underneath the Death Eater's bound hands, in between the loose loops of rope. A sticking charm would keep it in place. Then I took the slack from the end of the rope tossed over the chandelier and wound it ever tighter, keeping a firm grip on that end with cords of magic.

Travers slipped off the edge of the wide chasm and swung out into the middle, back and forth like a pendulum, held in place by the grace of my spellwork. I fused the loose end of the rope to the floor and that left him – still unconscious – swinging out over the abyss holding the blasted book of doom.

"Arry—"

"Cut the rope and that's one less pain in my ass, Fleur." The French beauty regarded me with an unreadable expression. "As I said, leverage, for when Voldemort shows up." I made a point of checking my watch, which was still spinning backwards and hadn't told true time since we arrived here. "Wonder what's keeping him."

"We should leave," Tonks said. "Harry, whatever you're planning, we're only three wands against six, maybe seven, and one of them is You Know Who!"

"I've had worse odds." Which was true, oh so true. It was also true that those worse odds had often killed me. Damn.

"Let's go while we still can."

"Too late," I said. "It is always too late, you know, because time flies... so fast." I began to laugh, to laugh and cry at the looks of equal horror on the four faces of my companions.

A thin trickle of blood cut down my forehead and into my eye.

"Perhaps you're not meant to beat him, Harry. Perhaps you were Chosen to die."

As one, we all turned to the antechamber beyond the unsealed vault door, perhaps sensing the approaching presence of the creature once known as Tom Marvolo Riddle, and his dark entourage.

There were four pinpricks of light growing in the darkness, and shadows fled over the electric-blue half-light from the dull torches on the walls. I may have imagined it, but was there a brief flash of raw, crimson eyes in that darkness?

My scar was on fire.

"Because I may be insane, but there are right kinds of insane, yes sir, and some of them can even save the world..."

My headache threatened to cripple me. The pain increased tenfold, and ten again. A dark haze crept into the corners of my vision. Worlds were colliding all around me, all around Harry fuckin' Potter, the Time Warrior, and the one contradiction the universe had to account for...

Dead yet alive.

Alive yet dead so many times.

I was screaming without a sound as the devil approached, and the reason I had gone back in time in the first place, all those lives ago, locked eyes with me from within the darkness.

I felt the Dark Lord's fierce smile, a grin from a lipless mouth, before I saw it...

"So is this the end?"

"It is one end – one of many, you know."

"You terrify me, Harry. What did you do?"

"Do? Nothing I haven't done before. Oh no, no, no... All I've done is spit in the face of infinity. All I've done is set the track to repeat. I've done the devil's work, boss, yeehaw... yeehaw..."

"Harry James Potter."

That voice cut through me like a dull razorblade, slicing at my heart, my mind... and what remained of my soul.

Here was the cause of my endless suffering. Here was the end of the world. Here was the reason I had turned Time into the blasted

wastelands of forever. God save me, here was the reason for my eternal damnation.

"Hello, Lord Voldemort."

The Dark Lord entered the Great Library at the forefront of a group of four Death Eaters. Bellatrix Lestrange stood on his right, grinning with wild eyes and licking her lips. Behind her was Rowle, wandless, and on Voldemort's left stood Amicus and Alecto Carrow.

"I must confess to a certain amount of... surprise," Voldemort said, his wand pointed at the floor. His face was relaxed, calm, yet I could see the barely concealed rage rippling beneath the surface. His pale skin, that slit of a nose, and those crimson eyes... I was marked for imminent death.

"Of all the lost cities in all the lost worlds I had to walk into yours..."

Voldemort's gaze fell to Tonks, to Fleur, over Jason and Grace, and finally to Travers dangling like a worm on a hook over the precipice. He stepped forward, closing the gap between us to less than thirty feet. Far too close for comfort, even on the best of days...

"Three wands and two Muggles, Harry," Voldemort mused. "Is Albus Dumbledore waiting in the wings, hmm?" The Dark Lord's eyes narrowed to twin lines of smouldering fire. "Surely Harry Potter, the Chosen One, did not breach Atlantis so alone?"

"Want to know how I did it?" I asked. I raised my bad hand. "It cost me a few fingers, a few night's sleep, and more than one fine Italian suit, but here I am."

The Death Eaters were spreading out behind Voldemort, covering the entrance. Bellatrix grinned at me and winked, her eyes promising death and worse than death. She'd keep that promise before the day was out.

"Yes, here you are." Voldemort shook his head. "Why call my attention down upon you, Harry? You could have gone unnoticed, I'm sure."

"First things first – my companions are leaving, and you'll let them leave."

Voldemort laughed. "You are in no position to make demands of me, Potter."

"Fuck you, yes I am." I levelled my wand against the rope that kept Travers alive. "Let them go or he falls, Voldemort. I'll kill him."

"Come now, Harry, you do not have it in you."

"Try me." My voice was hard – defiant and unbreakable.

"Even so, the loss of one is more than a fair price to end your interference." Voldemort considered me for a moment, perhaps waiting to test my resolve. "However resilient you have proven yourself to be across the years."

"Yeah, you're a heartless bastard," I said. "However, if you look closely, our mutual friend Travers has a certain book tucked into his bonds. The very book you have been trying for weeks to locate. The book that will open the Crypt of Forget up in that tower of yours. Oh yeah, now I have your attention."

"Master," Bellatrix whispered. Her voice always seemed to be dancing along the edge of some impossible insanity. "Master, allow me... I'll deal with Potter and his fr—"

"Be silent," Voldemort said. His tone was forced calm; his eyes didn't leave my face. "You are remarkably well informed, Harry. Still, I do not believe you will cut that rope. That is not how you work, is it?" Voldemort shook his head. "No. Dumbledore would not want his young protégé taking such dark, drastic steps. What would your dear, sweet mother say?"

"Dumbledore," I said, "is not here. And neither is my mother. Because you fucking killed her!" I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "But why take the risk? Let my companions leave unmolested and I'll

throw down my wand. You get Travers back, you get the book, and you get me."

Fleur stepped forward and grasped my arm. "'Arry, don't you dare—"

"Agreed."

There was dread silence for a moment, and then Voldemort motioned to his Death Eaters and they reluctantly cleared a path to the vaulted doors back through the outer library.

"No, Harry," Tonks said, glancing quickly at me then back to the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters. "Not an option."

I offered both Tonks and Fleur a soft, tired smile. "Arguing with me again? Trust me. Take Jason and Grace and the trunk and run."

"We cannot leave you—" Fleur began.

"Harry, they'll kill you."

I laughed. "You're not going to kill me are you, Voldemort?"

"I would not dream of it, Harry."

I winked at Tonks and Fleur. "See. Who wouldn't trust that pale face? Now I really, really need you to go and leave me here."

There was a note of urgency in my tone, a hint of frustration. Leave, I demanded the light in my eyes to convey my conviction. To get the goddamn message across. It's all part of the plan, ladies and gentlemen, all part of the plan... Fleur and Tonks had to know I was captured, had to see all of this, meet Voldemort, otherwise I could have just come here on my own. It all had to happen this way.

Any other way and they died, they all died, trying to rescue me, or trying to make it back to the real world on their own. This is how it had to be.

"I think we should go," Jason said, watching me and trying very hard not to look at Voldemort. He was pale and frightened, almost shaking. "Fleur, Tonks... we should go." Grace was nodding alongside him, holding his arm.

"I'll be back soon," I said, smiling that same old defeated smile. "Voldemort and I are just going to discuss a few things..."

"Harry, my patience is wearing thin." Voldemort took another step forward, brandishing his wand. "Your companions will leave now, in my mercy, or I will have to dispose of them myself."

My hand clenched around my wand. I wanted to fight, to fire a barrage of spells into that hated face, but I restrained myself. "Go," I practically growled. "No more arguing. Just trust me and go."

They went.

Cautiously, with Jason and Grace between them nudging the hovering trunk forward, Fleur and Tonks moved around the outer edge of the room, around the Death Eaters and Voldemort, who kept his wand trained towards me, and disappeared into the antechamber.

Fleur paused only once to glance back at me and I winked, offering her that much, before she disappeared around the corner and out of sight. I reminded myself that this was the way it had to happen, the way the story had to end, in the long run. Anything else cost lives I couldn't afford to lose.

"I'm surprised you let them go," I said in the silence that followed. I was regarded by the four Death Eaters and Voldemort with remarkable indifference. I reckon none of them thought I had long to live.

"It will be a small matter to hunt them down later. After all, how long can they survive in the dust of this once great city?"

I shrugged. "We brought a lot of soup with us, so it may surprise you."

"Indeed." Voldemort paused. "How did you find Atlantis, Harry?"

"Persistence, bit of luck, and I had a distinct advantage." I tapped my scar, which still trickled a thin line of blood down over my eye. "I knew you were here."

Voldemort said nothing, merely inclined his head. "There is more to it than that, is there not?"

I nodded. "Of course there is. In fact I'd go as far to say as—Diffindo!"

I'd had enough back and forth screwing around. The rope keeping Travers alive was sliced cleanly in two and the man fell without so much as a grunt, deadweight disappearing down the massive chasm.

Yeehaw! Yeehaw, indeed.

Voldemort acted fast, spinning his wand to catch the falling Death Eater, yet I was faster. Faster, smarter, better prepared.

I cast a multitude of curses in the blink of an eye, all non-verbal, and lit up the old library with the light of bone-breaking hexes, severing charms, and blinding jinxes. Voldemort was forced to spin to the side to avoid my curse light, and missed his window on catching Travers.

The unconscious Death Eater fell to his death, taking the dreaded Grefaénicon with him.

I had just killed a man – and it felt great. My blood pounded in my ears, my lips pulled back in a vicious snarl. I was awash with adrenalin – with fire and anger and rage.

The Death Eaters converged on me as one. Voldemort snarled and drew his wand against mine.

I hadn't paused to contemplate all of this, however. No. My wand was busy burning a rune into the cracked marble at my feet. Harsh lines, crisscrossing over one another. I muttered harsh Atlantean and pressed my hand to the rune in the ruin as it flared with pure silver light. It took less than a second.

There was a muffled explosion from behind me, then several more – much louder and a lot closer. A great fist of heat punched me in the back and I flew forward through the air, even as sick, oily green light blasted apart the stone where I had been standing. I spun through the air, so did the Death Eaters, and glimpsed the white fires that roared through the old dusty stacks.

My starlight bombs had done their trick again.

Voldemort braced himself against the explosion, a blue domed shield protecting his form from the heat and the chunks of hurtling debris. I slammed into the floor only a few feet from the Dark Lord, my wand clattered away, and a relentless wave of blistering air washed over me.

Alone and unarmed, I looked up at Voldemort and smiled my best shitkickin' grin.

For his part, the Dark Lord surveyed me with unmasked hatred... then looked beyond at the library as it went up in flames. Best laid plans going up in smoke, or falling into deep, dark chasms. His eyes flared with crimson malice and he snarled displeasure.

As the initial shockwave abated I slowly got to my knees, my skin burnt and cut in a dozen separate little nicks from the flying rubble. I made no move for my wand – there was no point. I rose to one knee and Voldemort smacked me back down with a wave of unseen force. He used his free hand to hold me in place by my hair, practically pulling it out at the roots. His hands were clammy and cold – the hands of a corpse.

"Harry, Harry..." Voldemort said, as the library began to really burn. Wood cracked and splintered, the books seemed to scream.

Suddenly Bellatrix was at her master's side, her eyes wide and wild in the light of the pure white flames. "My lord," she breathed and giggled, completely at ease in the chaos. If not for the ravages of Azkaban, she would have looked almost hot amongst the bedlam. Maybe that was just my fucked up mind. "My lord... take his life, take it..."

Voldemort pressed his wand against my throat. I made no move to fight him, no move to stop him... The tip was fiercely hot. I could smell my skin burning... Ash began to fall like flakes of snow as the library was consumed. I couldn't have stopped him – wandless as I was against this madman.

I was playing a hunch from memories belonging to other madmen. Memories that were mine by Time-given right. How it played out would depend on how enraged the Dark Lord was by what I had just done... Time was on my side.

It had to be.

"It was an interesting read, that book Travers died with..." I said. Think on that, you snake-faced wanker.

Voldemort's wand was burning a hole in my neck. The pain was excruciating, near-maddening, but always bearable.

"Do it," Bellatrix whispered, breathing hard. Her lips were wet with excitement. She was crying.

"You are a constant thorn in my side, Harry Potter," Voldemort said. "I am going to kill you."

The Dark Lord screamed and drew his wand across my neck in one vicious swipe.

I blinked in surprise, feeling no immediate pain, and raised my hand to my neck. It came away slick, red with blood. My dirtied white shirt was already soaked in the same vital fluid. I laughed and the sound caught in my throat – became a bubbling gurgle that sent numb pain shooting through my entire body.

It was impossible, Time said as much, yet Voldemort had just slit my throat.

Damn.

He let my hair go with a snarl of such hate, of such blind fury, that I could only keep smiling. Above all, ya gotta keep smiling, boss. Ha-ha. I hit the floor hard, my glasses fell from my face, and the world blurred into a haze of white fire, of dark silhouettes. Two crimson eyes, unblinking and devoid of warmth, stayed in sharp focus.

Then there was darkness. Hazy at first, uncertain, but then as true as always. Always and in all ways.

Oh... god.

And all faded to black.

A/N: Yep, cliffhanger. Express your undying hate for me in a review, and maybe also tell me how you thought this chapter went. I was a fan of the Harry/Fleur making out on the bridge of the ship scene, and the whole Voldemort confrontation. I've been waiting about 200,000 words to get to the whole Voldemort confrontation. As expected, the Dark Lord was a bastard about the godawful small affair.

Also, I'm away for a week this coming week, so if you email me don't expect an immediate reply. Won't be back until December, really, and there'll be minimal (read none) interwebz access for me where I'm going, so won't I have a nice lot of reviews to read when I get back. Heh. But seriously. Look out for the next chapter soon,

Joe

Chapter 23 – Living Is Easy With Eyes Closed

The laws of Time are mine!

And they will obey me!

~The Doctor

"Are you done, Harry?"

"Oh no... if anything I've been far too passive, far too merciful. That ends today. Today and yesterday and all the time in between... Let's take things up a notch."

It hurt waking up. But that was nothing new. It was supposed to hurt, I guess.

"So you've found a way to live with yourself... Somehow that will have to be enough to save the world."

A hand reached for my throat. It was my own. I could still feel the blood, feel the numb pain. My neck was whole, yet my fingers brushed against a thin, ropy line of what I assumed must be scar tissue. Damn... I was still in the game. My head was killing me.

"I'm tired of trying to save the world. Let someone else do it..."

"That's the problem. There is no one else. There's just you, Harry. And one broken human is simply not enough."

So I was alive.

Although it felt like I was about to die. There was no peace in death – not for me. To die would hurt more than the rest, more than the

headache and the way it felt like I was swallowing liquid fire every time I drew a short, shallow breath. Through bleary eyes I could make out a twilight sky framed against a narrow window. A cool viridian wash of eternal twilight. Forever-light. Still alive and still Atlantis.

Time fled away from me, as is its desire. Sometimes I think it fears me.

"You're supposed to be the hero, Harry Potter. Quit the smoking and the drinking and step up. Fate seems to see something in you, despite what the rest of us think..."

I took a swig from the bottle. It had been a long time since Firewhiskey burnt on the way down. "I'm sitting this round out, buddy. Time was I'd be all over that 'hero' shit, but I've lived so long that it doesn't seem to matter anymore." I laughed. "Apathy. That's the real killer here. As much a demon as any you'd find in Atlantis."

"Merlin, not this Atlantis nonsense again!"

"It's real, Minister. Voldemort is going to unleash an army there, and it's going to eat the whole wide world."

"Then stop him, for Merlin's sake!"

"I... I don't want to."

Time came crawling back, like a loyal mongrel dog to the cruellest of masters...

I opened my eyes and although the sky hadn't brightened or darkened I had the sense that some hours had gone by. Falling out of memory was easy, as I shrugged away the lingering thoughts of my stupor, yet it was sticking the landing that really hurt. I always fell into regret.

And I had enough of those to make the devil weep.

There was very little to take into account in the room about me. It was a box. Stone walls and a dusty brick floor barely ten feet across. A slit of a window looked out on Atlantis. I managed to stand and lean against the wall, gazing down at the ruined city. I was some height above it, locked in Voldemort's Tower of Doom. Despite the fancy new scar slashed across my throat, all was going according to plan.

And of course I'd been disarmed.

Wandless and shirtless. Scuffed and torn suit pants, my glasses, and a pair of black shoes in need of a good polish was all I had at my disposal. My chest was caked in dried blood. Not a lot of options for escape. I took a deep breath, stretching my sore throat, and let it out slowly.

"Last time counts for all..." I whispered, and turned to face the heavy iron door opposite the window. I stood with my hands clasped behind my back and began to wait.

Raise up your fists and scream bloody defiance into the abyss...

Still standing before the window, a look of eternal calm on my face, was how Voldemort found me some time later.

The heavy door swung open on silent hinges and the Dark Lord stepped into the cell, regarding me with his head held back, his nostrils flaring. Robes of darkest midnight concealed his hands, yet I imagine he gripped his wand at the ready, awaiting any surprises from the Chosen One.

I started strumming on my air guitar. "You can't start a fire... you can't start a fire without a spark..." I hummed Springsteen at his best. "I'm dying for some action – I'm sick of sitting 'round here trying to write this book!"

Voldemort was not amused – he never was – but then only one of us was really born to run.

"You didn't let me die," I said, slinging my six-string over my shoulder.

The Dark Lord nodded. "Obviously. You live so long as you are useful to me, Harry Potter. You will tell me how you come to be here, in the Lost City, how you knew of the Vault in this tower, and what you know of its combination."

I tapped my chin with one of the fingers left on my bad hand. "And if I refuse?"

"Does any part of you doubt that I will do what I must to make you speak, Harry?"

I shook my head. "No, you're a prick, I get that. What you need to understand, though, is that I won't break despite what you throw at me. That's not why I'm here, anyway."

"Oh?"

"No, I come with a proposition. We open the Vault, you and I, and descend into the depths of Atlantis together. I want to see what's down there as much as you." I knew what was down there. A clock, a bridge and eternal (can ya say infernal?) damnation. "Together, Voldemort, or not at all."

"I think not. Your position is hopeless, Harry. You are far from home and the protection of Albus Dumbledore. Do you even understand what following me here means? This is not the world you know – we are in a realm of magic beyond your flawed understanding."

It was a strange grin that bared my teeth. "I understand we are going to do this the hard way, dickhead. So bring your torture and your mind games – let's get on with it." I laughed, rocking back and forth on my heels. "You won't break me." I'm already broken. "And we'll talk when you're ready to see sense and want the Vault open."

Voldemort held his silence a moment longer than was entirely comfortable. It had been some long years since I had been nervous or downright afraid in the presence of this murderer. In all honesty, he was no longer worth the worry. He had to be stopped. He had to be

put down – destroyed. But only to save the world, or rather, to stop it from going straight to Hell.

"Harry, Harry..." Voldemort laughed. It was a short, rasping sound. "The world has chosen you to defy me, has it not?"

"Something like that."

"You've always made an admirable job of it. Your father would be so proud." The Dark Lord paused. "He would have let Travers drop, too, I believe. Merely to spite me."

"He was better off dead. One less wand against me."

"The forces aligned against you, Potter, are more powerful than you can comprehend. Your defiance will cost you nothing but suffering."

"Looking forward to it."

Voldemort removed his wand from within the folds of his robes and spun it slowly. A trail of sparkling yellow light formed in the air. I knew what was coming. It was magic similar to the star curtain I had forged through beneath Mt. Everest in order to gain the manuscript for the Gates – way back at the start of this journey, this life. Not quite as dangerous, but still unnerving.

"Think of what you have already lost." The stream of yellow mist solidified and took form. The colours swirled, a shape shimmered into being. It was a man – a man screaming without voice.

Sirius Black fell to his knees before me, begging for mercy through silent lips.

Other phantoms smoked from the tip of Voldemort's wand. My mother. My father. They begged for compassion in a terrible, deafening silence. It was all a trick – I knew that. But to see the dead again, even if only in falsity, made me twitch. These were people I had failed, oh more than once.

Voldemort disappeared behind his creations and the apparitions spun around me, pleading that same horrible pity. I stood steady, keeping my half-grin firmly in place. I wanted to look detached, uninterested. A band of sweat broke out across my forehead at the tears on my mother's face.

Fate had never been kind to my family. If there is a price to pay to defy the darkness in this war, then the Potters can claim to have paid their fair share. The fickle bitch exacted a price in blood heavy enough to sink the Titanic.

"The dead are dead, Voldemort." Except for me. Up until this life I had been immortal in the worst way. "Not even the magic you and I can wield will ever change that." To this degree at least. I never could explain the eight-year limit on travelling back from the future. Perhaps one day...

It grew cold in my cell. Alone with the Dark Lord and the ghosts of the past. Fresh, clear lightning bolt cuts appeared on the foreheads of my mother and father. Sirius looked on in abject misery, his withered face a mask of life gone wrong – of the cost always being too high to resist.

"I tire of this, Riddle!" The edge in my voice spoke of command far beyond my supposed sixteen years. The faux-ghosts vanished in a hiss of sparkling yellow smoke and the freezing air warmed.

Voldemort stepped forward as the darkness receded, regarding me from behind his crimson eyes. He sensed the change in me and was at a loss to explain it. I held his eye contact for a moment and allowed the gentle probe into my mind.

An accomplished Legilimens, the Dark Lord cast his thoughts along the outer reaches of my mind, heading towards the chaos. He wouldn't push it too far, not after what had happened in the Ministry some weeks ago. The agony of possessing me was something Voldemort feared.

Keep going, I thought. Dig a little deeper.

Voldemort did so, in his arrogance, and struck the chaotic fire and madness that was long decades of trying and dying. The memories of futures past, of futures yet to be. It was like being struck by a tsunami of seething fire, of raw tempered emotion. Voldemort screamed and his hand jumped to cover his eyes. He fell back against the iron door, breathing hard, struggling to compose himself. He shook and hissed dismayed anger between his teeth.

When he rose back to his full height, composed enough to meet my eyes again, he found me unmoved, hands still clasped firmly behind my back, and that shitkickin' grin on my face. It was enough to break his forced calm, his posturing. Voldemort drew his wand against me and cried, "Crucio!"

My memories may have caused a fraction of the pain flowing into me now, as my nerves erupted in white-hot daggers of agony, yet I knew the bastard would not have been able to make any sense of the chaos he had glimpsed inside my head. The pain was real enough that I dropped to one knee, grunting under the weight of my boiling flesh.

Pain I could manage. Better than anyone. I'm an expert in detaching my mind from the madness of this curse. I fled into deeper madness, into the torn and ruined wastelands of time that I could call my mind. I merely jumped from one fire into another. The pain made no difference.

It was just a different brand of the same old shit.

The curse went on for some time, and it hurt. I could withstand the agony – and trying to drive me into insanity was fairly redundant (ha-ha!) – but it weakened me, sapped my resolve. I would not give in, not this side of death, but nor could I allow this weakness to show.

I began to chuckle in the conflicting arenas of pain battling for dominance inside my head. I began to laugh out loud, and Voldemort withdrew his wand with a snarl and glared down at me on my knees. I was laughing so hard that I almost cried.

"Potter?"

"I'm still here..."

Voldemort paused. "Are you ready to tell me what I want to know?"

I had bitten my tongue at some point during that curse. I spat a mouthful of saliva and blood on the floor at the Dark Lord's feet. That was answer enough.

Voldemort did not seem surprised. "Very well. Remember this, Harry, in the long hours ahead. I gave you the chance to save yourself unimaginable suffering, in my mercy, and you refused."

I sighed. "Just bring the bitch on."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes and turned back to the open iron door – the only real way out of the cell. At some unseen signal, Bellatrix Lestrange stepped into view, bowing deeply before Voldemort and entering the room to my left.

"Hello, sweetheart." I winked. "You, me and the fuckin' Dark Lord makes three."

Bellatrix's eye twitched and her lips pulled back from her teeth in an unconscious snarl. Then she chuckled, placing the tip of her wand against her tongue and kissing the wood.

"Bellatrix has been instructed on what information to extract, Harry." There was no regret or emotion on Voldemort's face. My eternal tormenter had me dead to rights, and he knew it. To him it was only a matter of time before I cracked. "And she is very good at this task."

"Any whore worth a damn knows how to make you scream."

Voldemort actually smiled. It was a terrifying sight to behold. Watching the Devil and his tricks always is. He turned and stepped out of my cosy little cell.

"Far from home, little Harry..." Bellatrix whispered. This bitch was as insane as I was – and not in the good, happy-go-lucky way.

I unslung my air guitar and hummed a few chords. "Johnny said: 'Devil just come on back if you ever wanna try again... I dun told you once, you son of a bitch, I'm the best that's ever been!'"

Voldemort paused at the door to issue a final command as Bellatrix trained her wand between my eyes. He met my gaze and held it for a long moment, trying to discern the change he saw, and felt, in me. Trying to understand just what I had become... what I had gained and lost since last we met.

It was beyond understanding. There was no measure for what I had become. And they would all learn that the hard way in the long days ahead... Beyond understanding. Always had been.

"Do not kill him," the Dark Lord said, and then was gone.

So close now... can you feel it?

The universe is on fire! The Infernal Clock skips another beat and a thousand worlds – a thousand thousand – fall screaming into the darkness beyond oblivion.

Time.

Every effort I had made to shift the course of history had gone desperately – horribly – wrong...

Invisible cords bound my wrists to the floor and stretched my arms out to the walls of the cell. Similar restraints cuffed my ankles. I lay spreadeagled in the dust, able to glimpse a sliver of twilit sky on the edge of my sight.

But then the universe has a way of course correcting, does it not? Was I damned from the start? Perhaps death was the right choice, and not just the easy one...?

Soft footsteps circled me and I didn't bother to track Bellatrix's movements around the cell. I was already detaching myself from this room, walling away the parts of me that could feel and betray. It was a simple task – I had a lot of practice at this part of the game. My torturer giggled softly as she pressed the heel of her boot down across my throat, still chewing on her wand.

The cost of my detachment was one of the few things that could still terrify me. To flee from the physical pain was a simple matter, but to flee from Bellatrix's particular brand on insanity – a fetid, disgusting thing – required a jaunt down memory lane. And the memories in my head were of the whole wide world burning.

It would be fair to say I had picked up a few damaging scars along the way. And not all of them were marked as clear as a lightning bolt on the forehead.

"Dear baby Harry Potter..." Bellatrix whispered. Her tone was a shiver, a thrill. I gasped for breath through my damaged throat as she shifted her weight against my neck.

I was trading one method of torture for another. Bellatrix knew her trade, no doubts there, but then so did I. I could withstand the horror show in my head – you can dig it, boss – but just barely.

"All alone in the lost, lost city." Bellatrix removed her foot from my neck and knelt down next to me. Her wild hair and furious, uncaring eyes were all I could see. She trailed her wand, slick with her saliva, up my cheek and across my forehead. "Are you going to tell me what I want to hear?"

"No," I said. "But then that is what you want to hear, isn't it?"

She giggled again – an annoying sound made all the more so by the way she smacked her tongue across her lips. "I do so like it when they resist, Harry. It makes the cries when they break that much louder."

"Sweetheart, you're insane."

I knew how to push her buttons. I'd been here before – more than once. The memories only just surfacing in my mind spoke of long days that may as well have been years spent in this cell. I would do my best to hurry things along.

Bellatrix scowled. She did not like the word insane. "Understand, Harry Potter, that you have absolutely no control over your situation here. You are helpless... and you are mine." Insane. "Crucio!" It was said as an afterthought, but she did mean it.

The pain struck me but I was already too far detached for it to matter. A tired grunt escaped my lips and I bucked, arching my back up high, before mastering the feelings. I was hard. I was unbreakable. This torture was pointless.

A memory broke through to the surface to make sure it stayed that way...

The sky was on fire.

I sat slumped against the base of a forgotten cliff face, somewhere in the world, gazing up at the vast jets of green flame that crisscrossed the heavens, disappearing in vicious arcs over the horizon. A lance of blackened bone pierced my side, pinning me to the wall.

My wand was in reach but I was spent. Hideous creatures of bone and dust marched across the land at the bidding of their Dark Master. I could hear Voldemort laughing in my mind, sure in his victory.

"Oh laugh it up, you bastard," I whispered. I couldn't feel anything below the neck. Except the cold, always the cold, but even that was secondary to the voices in my head. "You can kill me but it only gives me another chance to destroy you..."

Why did I need so many chances? Why couldn't I get it right? Bellatrix stopped cursing me and stood frowning down at my slack face, void of any real feeling.

"No one can resist screaming under that curse," she said. Her face split into a wide grin. "You are special, aren't you, Harry?"

"Insane," I said, forcing the nerve spasms down. Was I talking to Bellatrix or myself? Perhaps it didn't matter. I twitched and resisted the urge to moan.

"Have it your way then... Crucio!"

"Honey, I'm home..."

"Dear Merlin, 'Arry, you're bleeding!"

Fleur looked great in the light of the moon. Pale and aloof, untouchable and yet, in some impossible way, mine. Through the trees danced sparks of silver magic, falling like snow from the midnight sky. It was the burning ash of a hundred thousand exploding demons.

I'd managed, at long last and however many lives, to vanquish Voldemort's demonic army as it broke through from the realm of Atlantis. It was all for naught this time round, however, as I was bleeding to death...

"T'is just a scratch, sweetheart."

I fell into her arms. My blood marred her otherwise flawless skin and light blue robes. Fleur grasped her wand and ran it over my body, assessing the damage. It didn't take her long to realise...

"Oh, 'Arry... you are barely seventeen. Zis is not fair."

"It's cold and lonely in the deep dark night," I said. "Ain't no doubt about it." Then I laughed.

Then I died.

Memories of dying were always festering just beneath the surface.

I was aware that the world's worst pain curse had once again been lifted. It was like falling when I blinked and found myself back in the cell, looking up at Bellatrix, the memories abating for a time.

"Do you have something to tell me, little Harry?" Bellatrix's tone was sickly-sweet.

"I've been looking for an original sin'," I laughed and sang. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. "One with a twist and a bit of a spin. And since I've done all the old ones 'til they've all been done in—

"Crucio!"

There'll be Hell to pay someday – put it all on the bill, I guess.

"There he is..."

In the ruins of our crashed Atlantean battle cruiser – the Reminiscence – Ron and Hermione, accompanied by Neville, found me slumped in the command chair, one leg snapped clean off. I'd managed to stop the bleeding, but there was a lot more going on inside. I felt like dying.

"Harry, your leg!" Hermione cried.

"Hello, my friends."

Ron was pale enough to be sick. "Sit tight, mate, Luna's gone for help. The Healers are just up the street."

"You Know Who's collapsed the Ministry in on itself," Neville said – relaying a moot point now. "Those bone-creatures are tearing London apart."

"You three always stand by me," I said. It was getting cold now – a familiar cold. Death, my old friend, send me back. "You better watch that... it'll get you killed."

The minutes began to melt into hours... and already the hours might have been days. Bellatrix did not seem to tire. She never left. But then I couldn't trust time, I could never trust time, now least of all.

"You are mine, Harry," she whispered. There was an edge of vicious torture in her voice, underneath the giggles and the frustrating way her teeth chattered together. "The Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One, has no power, does he? No, no, no... Harry Potter is nothing."

She wanted me to feel fear – to let it mingle with the pain both psychological and physical – and reduce me to a quivering, helpless mess susceptible to coercion. It was an effective tactic, one that had never failed the evil bitch, but Bellatrix had met her match in the fuckin' Chosen One.

She relented on the Cruciatus – just for a moment, I was sure – and instead set to cutting me open with a thin, infinitely sharp purple curse light. I raised my head enough to see my chest sliced open, my wrists slit, and the blood begin to flow... I was dizzy all at once.

And strangely hungry for a Pot Noodle.

Bellatrix could heal the physical damage she caused as adeptly as any competent witch or wizard. After a time I found myself tiring of her all-too-gentle touch and set to laughing in her face, calling her increasingly inventive variations of 'insane whore'. That always got the old favourite pain curse out of her, which sent me reeling into blissfully torturous memory.

I had to remind myself that this was necessary to the plan. But oh how I hated the plan. The hours bled away.

"All things must change."

"Save you, Harry Potter. The cost you've paid ensures that you never truly die... that you exist, you remain – you go on, Harry."

It had been such a small price at the time. A fuck in the woods, my life and my soul, and I was more immortal than Voldemort would ever be. Time herself had made the deal, the Infernal Clock had signed off on it... and I had my second chance.

"How do I undo this curse?"

The spirit of water refused to answer me. Deep in the realms of the Forget I was denied, ignored. Raw fury, ignited by the arrogance of my many, many years, made me lash out.

I drove my wand through the suggestion of a creature before me, slashing it open. Unforgiving light, as bright as the sun, spilled from the gash. I screamed. My eyes burst in their sockets and my skull shatter—

My hair lay in clumps on the floor of the cell all around my head. Bellatrix hovered over me, her boots on either side of my neck, to admire her handiwork. She had shaved me bald and was running the tip of her wand across my exposed skin.

"Daft harlot!" I was running short of insults.

Bellatrix ignored me now, caught in her own little world of blood and flesh – and desire. Desire to make me scream. "How did you get that scar over your heart?" she asked.

I raised my head enough to glimpse down at my bare chest. There were several open cuts, some shallow, some deep, bleeding onto the floor around me. Bellatrix had either neglected to heal them or the thought simply hadn't occurred to her. I gazed at the scar on my chest, the thin white line that had followed me through time.

It had been Tweedledum or Tweedledee – one of Chronos' Orc-Mare creatures – that had given me that. Merlin, it had been a busy few weeks...

It was an impossible scar that had followed me through death and time itself. The sheer inability for me to explain it in any way that this deranged tramp could understand made me laugh and sigh.

"Honestly, I don't know."

"Tell me."

"Or else what?"

Bellatrix walked around me and sat at my side, running her wand over the heart scar. "You have to ask?"

"How many hours have we been at this, you stupid bitch? What makes you think more of the same will make any difference at all?"

"Everyone has their limit, Harry. I admit you have withstood more than any man I have ever known, but your resolve won't last forever. Indeed, already cracks are forming in that arrogant façade you wear so well..."

Fucked if they were. I was indestructible. "Blow me."

Bellatrix's smile promised malice and worse than malice. "I can make you want it, Harry. I can hurt you so much that it becomes vital to you – you'll beg me for more... and if you tell me what I want to know, you shall receive it."

I had to grin. I imagined it looked quite the part with my teeth stained red. "Tell me, what was it you wanted to know?"

"How did you find Atlantis? Where are your friends hiding? What is it you know of the book that fool Travers died with?" Bellatrix jabbed me hard in the side with her wand. I grunted. "Can you open the room at the heart of this tower?"

"Persistence, fuck you, quite a bit, and yes, yes I can."

"Are you lying to me, little boy?" Bellatrix's grin turned feral. "What would mummy and daddy – or dear old Sirius, for that matter – think of you lying, Harry?"

"To you and Voldemort?" I laughed. "Don't be stupid."

"Do not," Bellatrix whispered, "say his name."

"Which one?" I sighed.

Bald, bleeding and hurt I closed my eyes as Bellatrix regarded me in maddening silence. This was never a happy story, not by far, and the hero was an insane kid with a god complex. I knew that. I knew it. So why did I try so hard? Why resist what had been inevitable across so many lifetimes? Right then the only reason that came to me was blonde and French.

"Be thankful the Dark Lord is not conducting your interrogation himself, Harry," Bellatrix said, and a shiver of true fear rippled across her face. "His understanding of the mind... his genius... You would beg for my gentle touch."

"Oh you may make me moan, Bella, but you'll never make me beg."

Her smile returned. She shifted her leg and her weight came down on top of me. I lay between her legs and she sat astride my chest, just above my stomach. "Before you were marked for death, Harry, your mother and father had already openly defied the Dark Lord more than once."

Prophecy demanded as much. "Good for them."

"They were fools and the price of their defiance cost them their lives – and has brought their only son to this end."

"It also cost Voldemort thirteen years of a wraithlike existence cowering in the forests of Albania."

Bellatrix leaned forward, thrusting her legs into my sides, until her face was hovering just over mine. It may have been in my head, but I was sure I could smell the madness radiating off of her. A stink like burning electrical wire. Her breath was cold, as were her eyes.

"You are going to scream for me, Harry."

She moved her lips down and kissed my neck.

It was soft at first, then harder... until she was sucking on my skin over the new ropy scar. I tried to buck her off but she giggled and

wrapped her legs harder into my sides. Then she bit me – hard. I felt the skin of my neck break and warm blood began to flow.

Bellatrix sucked on my throat a while longer, savouring the moment, no doubt, before sitting up, thrusting herself back and cackling around at the barren cell. Violet sparks spewed forth from her wand. She rubbed herself against me. Her lips, drooling down her chin, were slick crimson with my blood.

"Now it's time," she said, a monster of Azkaban – a monster long before that. She squeezed my cheeks, pursing my lips, and then shoved her tongue into my mouth. To her credit, she was careful to mind my teeth, lest I bite her tongue off, but that would serve no real end. "Give me what I want, Harry Potter," she whispered, breathing hard. She placed her wand into my mouth. "You will give me what I want."

A terrible pause, a single heartbeat, and then,

"Crucio!"

It was a tired, oh so tired, agony that ripped me apart as the curse exploded between my teeth and inside my skull. The pain was beyond measure, beyond endurance, but then I did not endure the pain, I rode it like a wave. It flayed the flesh from my bones, it scraped white-hot daggers into my soul and it liquefied all but the most basic of thought.

But believe it or not I had been here before, and this was the best Bellatrix LeStrange had to offer.

I used my detachment now – not to fall into memory – but to keep silent through the pain, to maintain defiant eye contact with the Death Eater bitch as she gave it her all. I bit down hard on her wand, forcing a fierce, bloody grin. Yes, my grin said. You're crazy, Bella, but you're not even close to playing in my league.

A flash of that same fear she had felt when speaking of Voldemort's torture methods appeared behind her eyes and I knew, after the long hours, that I had won.

I wouldn't give her what she wanted – what her twisted and ruined mind needed. I would not scream.

Her expression slumped into something petulant and angry. I wasn't playing the game – not by her rules anyway.

Bellatrix broke the connection to the Cruciatus Curse and spat in my face.

A/N: So... crazy bitch, huh? There was going to be another scene but it felt good to end it here, and I didn't want to leave you guys hanging after that cliffhanger in this last chapter any longer than necessary. Not when there are so many more excellent cliffhangers on their way. Also I wanted to end it with Harry kind of winning for once. He's been getting his ass kicked this entire story – I felt a victory, no matter how small or how it was cruelly earned, deserved its own end.

For fans of my writing, I have a new story up and at 'em. Check out Of Harry and Harry on my profile page. A Potter/Dresden Files xover. Yeah, it is awesome and you should read it.

Okay, you got two options – review, or send me a beer so I can keep writing Harry at this insane level. (Note: It takes a lot of beer.)

All the best,

Joe

Chapter 24 – Between Pleasure and Pain

He said, "It is new, indeed, for I made it last night in a dream of strange cities; and dreams are older than brooding Tyre, or the contemplative Sphinx, or garden-girdled Babylon."

~Lovecraft

"I discovered a place down there, Professor, a realm of magic beyond anything I could ever understand."

Dumbledore rested his chin on his hands, his long beard obscuring his old fingers. "Did this place have a name?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "The Atlanteans called it the Fae and Forget. They breached it some ten thousand years ago by accident. Pushed magic too far and the walls of reality crumbled... they unleashed an army of demonic bone-men that wiped civilisation from the face of the earth."

"And you helped Voldemort access this same world, this realm of the Fae and Forget?"

"It's the only way I can stop him from gaining all the power of Atlantis, on the border between both our worlds, and return here to the real world." I threw up my hands in hopeless defeat. "Because his soul is so ruined he can come and go as he pleases and doesn't have to pay the price I did."

"A price?"

My laughter was hollow and ravenous as it echoed around Dumbledore's office. The previous headmasters, all awake and staring at me in their frames, shied away from the sound, as laughter turned to desperate sobs. I had not cried in so long.

"God save me, Dumbledore, I had to give up death."

I am forced to live.

Again and again until I get it right. I have been forced to live.

But I'm only human, despite all I've done, and mortality is a natural part of life. To take that away, to die into eight years ago and remain alive, is an abuse against my humanity as abhorrent as creating a Horcrux – or seven Horcruxes. And the past – the future – has finally caught up with me.

This life counts for all because if I screw up this time, this last chance, then I'll never be able to die. I'll have become an immortal monster caught in an agonising cycle of constant life – and I'll have dragged the whole world, Time itself, screaming into the abyss with me.

My crimes are many. My sins are beyond count. When you get right down to the bare bones of the situation, dissecting the morality of the choices made, I am no better than Lord Voldemort. If the world knew what I'd done wrong for the right reasons, I'd be crucified.

Dark Lord Potter, they would call me, and I would have bought and paid for that name a thousand times over in their blood.

"What have you done, Harry?"

"What did you ask me to do, Tonks?" I looked around the room, at all the familiar faces packed into the Great Hall. Outside, the world was on fire, the wards were crumbling. It was only a matter of time before the demonic armies of the Dark Lord broke through. "What do you all ask me to do? EVERY DAMN TIME?"

"Harry—"

"NO!" I cast my wand aside, never wanting to see it again, knowing I would be Waking Up with it soon. "SAVE THE WORLD, HARRY! ONLY YOU CAN STOP HIM! YOU'RE THE FUCKING CHOSEN ONE! ANY OF THIS RINGING A BELL?"

Their silence only angered me further. Damn this world and damn me for a fool.

"Did you make Bella scream for her failure?"

Voldemort waved his wand and released the invisible bonds that nailed me to the blood- and dust-caked floor. "In trying to break you, Harry, I set her an impossible task. I do not know how, but you have changed greatly since we met in the Ministry over the shards of prophecy."

I dragged myself back against the wall, under the slit of a window looking out at Atlantis. Raw agony surged through my limbs as I worked them for the first time in hours that may have been days. There was no way I could stand, not just yet. I rested my head back against the wall and bared my bloody teeth in a grin.

"You still made her scream though?"

"Failure, however expected, is unacceptable."

That made me chuckle. "Very good." I frowned. "Well, good enough until I kill her, I suppose."

"Why should I not kill you now, Harry?" Voldemort drew his wand between my eyes.

"Could I get a glass of water or something?" My voice was a hoarse whisper. Blood was all I could taste. I had enough feeling in my arm to rub the top of my freshly shaven head. It was a small matter growing it back. I'd keep it shaven for now – part of the new badass image I was trying to sell the Dark Lord. "Also, killing me accomplishes nothing."

"I beg to differ. However, you say you are willing to open the Vault of Forget – I do not believe you can – but still, I find it near-impossible that you are in Atlantis at all." Voldemort reached into his robes and produced a small metal box that sat heavy in the palm of his pale hand. "Let us see if we can work together, Harry."

"Yes, let us."

"This box is locked beyond my understanding. It is marked with three ancient runes that are older than anything seen in the Wizarding World." Voldemort was trying to remain indifferent, but I could hear the frustration grinding just beneath the surface. "For a glass of water, Harry, and your life, can you open this box?"

I eyed the mythrill container and nodded. "Show me the runes." Voldemort held the box before me. I made no move to take it. The runes were simple enough, Atlantean of course, and nothing more than a child's lock. "With your wand tap far left, far right and then the centre rune, and whisper the incantation: 'Jyrinex!'"

Voldemort hesitated, searching for any lie in my face. There was none. He tapped the runes in order and whispered the old Atlantean word, shaking it clear of dust for the first time in ten thousand years. The box clicked in his hand.

Soft, gentle music flowed from within. Simple notes, chimes and chords creating a sound last heard before the first time the world ended – so very long ago. I found it strangely comforting. Something normal in a world of horrors.

"It's a music box," I said.

Voldemort peered inside and found nothing, which was a lot less than what he had been expecting. Nonetheless, I had proven myself to him – for all the good it would do us both in the end. He tossed the box aside, useless. It clattered into the far corner of the cell.

"I think we understand each other," I said. Then a foreign thought occurred to me. "Have you ever run into a man calling himself Chronos?"

"I have not."

"How about a woman named Saturnia?"

"Names of old gods, Harry, of a time when wizards and muggles alike believed in the absurd."

"Yeah."

Voldemort turned and left my cell without another word. I had given him more than enough to think about, to consider. He would agree to my plan, in part, as he always did, only to betray me at the crux and force a duel that would shatter Atlantis into dust. More dust.

The iron door slammed closed behind him. A little more light seemed to flicker in through the window with the Dark Lord gone. "Hey," I called through the metal. "We had a deal, man, we had a deal!"

I felt Voldemort pause in the corridor beyond my prison. A moment later a thin glass of cool water appeared on the floor of my cell.

I relished every drop as if it were my last.

This won't take much longer.

This is not the end – nor is it the beginning. I've no idea what the end is and I've long since forgotten what the beginning looked like.

I was left in my cell for some days after Voldemort had me open the music box. Every few hours a glass of water would appear, as well as a bowl of bread and soup. The Dark Lord was keeping me alive for the time being – as he always did.

Left on my own, with naught but memory and soup to keep me company, I drifted in and out of past and future lives. I saw things that were not there, heard whispers that existed only in my mind (and, I suppose, damned alternate realities), and thought of Fleur and Tonks, Jason and Grace.

My companions were alive and well, of that I could be sure. The wards and runes surrounding the battleship would keep all save Voldemort away, and the Dark Lord was not about to venture from his tower until he had cracked the Vault of Forget. Or until I had cracked it for him.

I missed Fleur, most of all, missed her scent and her touch. This life I had chosen her, out of them all, to be with. Some lives I choose Tonks, other lives I choose both – most lives I choose neither. No one. Not this time, however, as this was the last time. The note I had left Fleur would explain enough for them to stay well away. If all went to plan, and I had no reason (save perhaps Chronos and Saturnia) to think it wouldn't, then I'd be seeing her again soon.

More than two loves across the long years, Harry, a voice whispered deep within the chaotic maelstrom of memory. More than two women damned for being close to you.

"They're not damned," I whispered, staring up out of the window at the constant twilight beyond. The unchanging sky was enough to drive anyone mad. "I died, too, so they can all live again... another chance."

Is that a mercy, you think? To die and live again? None remember it save you, Harry, each time you die, but you are tearing the souls of billions from the void and forcing reality to reset. Can't you hear the souls of the dead screaming at you to stop?

"I can't stop." To live, to die, to buy the beers... What was her name? "To stop is to be defeated. I will never be defeated."

Inhuman fortitude, impossible strength in the face of insurmountable odds and a helluva persistent headache. It always gets worse and worse, does it not?

"Chances waiting to be taken," I said. The sky was darkening, which was impossible, so I guess I was either falling asleep or passing out. One and the same in my current fucked up condition. "She was Australian. Cute. What was her name?" It was on the tip of my tongue.

Not Fleur. Not Tonks.

Black hair with a streak of soft blonde. Large, kind eyes and a sharp nose. She was only tiny, five feet and change, but beautiful. She

never wore make-up, but she didn't need it... Her face was captivating. Plain and friendly – more than enough to inspire desire.

"Her name?" I asked the voice that was only the madness in my mind. Batshit-insane and feelin' fine, that was me. SO BE IT! "She was a muggle and she loved me."

Tessa.

"Tessa," I whispered. Darkness descended. "Oh yeah..."

I met her after running away.

I fled Britain with nothing save my wand, a change of clothes, and a backpack stuffed with currency and fake ID's courtesy of the goblins.

I had decided to sit this life out, to let Voldemort have his way with Atlantis and end the world. I had eight years before that would happen, at best – two or three at least. None of them would be able to find me – I could disappear into the Muggle world.

The mild headache that had refused to relent in the few days since I Woke Up at the Dursleys' was concerning but not overly so... I had stuck around long enough to stop Fleur being murdered out the front of Gringotts and then Apparated across international borders as fast and as far as I could.

I watched the sun rise from atop the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

I had lunch on the coast overlooking the Great Barrier Reef.

I caught a train that night across the heart of the Australian outback, cutting straight overland towards the distant west coast – some three-thousand kilometres away. Two-thousand or so miles in real money, boss.

I discovered that Australia is a lot of trackless, arid sand – somewhat uninhabitable for the most part. I did not think on the war I had left behind, the nightmare waiting to be unleashed. I thought of the hot

girl in the next cabin over, travelling back to Perth with her family. I thought of a medium-rare steak and two fingers of \$500 scotch.

It was better not to think of the world on fire. Of the sky being swallowed by demons. That was all to come soon enough. For now, the world was my playground.

Perth was warm and sunny, despite it technically being winter in the southern hemisphere. I rented a shack near the beach, built back over the sand dunes. I could throw a stone and hit the sparkling silver water of the Indian Ocean. I spent long days down at the beach, soaking up the sun and turning my back on the world.

I made friends.

There was Eddie and Matt, surfers the pair, just eighteen and looking to go work in the snowfields over east for the next few months. Their girlfriends, Claire and Suzie, who liked my accent. We got drunk together, and any night would find at least two of the four sleeping in the hammocks out the back of my beach shack.

Time passed. Winter rolled into summer and I heard nothing of war, fought nothing but the flies on the BBQ, and drank myself stupid every night – with company or without. During the day, I wandered up and down the coast, visiting the shopping centre now and again for supplies – supplies and books.

I read a lot.

I devoured books of any genre (favouring the fantasy section, of all things). It was interesting to read about muggles interpreting far away and distant worlds of magic, while the real magical world was setting up to implode in on itself in the next few years. My favourite bookshop was also a café that served really good banana bread and chocolate milkshakes – with whipped cream, of course.

It was there I met Tessa.

Booknest in Cottesloe, near Fremantle, a short walk down the coast from my shack. She was young, seventeen, a year older than me and a year younger than my passport said I was.

There's no such thing as love at first sight.

But there is love of an idea at first sight.

And I fell in love with the idea of Tessa hard and fast – the ways of inevitability are often as kind as they are cruel, and telling the difference is never fair.

Black hair with a streak of soft blonde. Large, kind eyes and a sharp nose. She was only tiny, five feet and change, but beautiful. She never wore make-up, but she didn't need it... Her face was captivating. Plain and friendly – more than enough to inspire desire.

Tessa worked at the bookshop behind the counter every other day of the week. The rate at which I read and the amount of books I bought got me a 20% discount whenever she was working. I started coming in when she was there because she liked to talk to me, even sat with me and had a coffee if the place wasn't busy (Wednesday afternoons and Friday evenings became the time I visited once I figured this out).

I loved her company. I loved her stories. She wanted to be a writer, but was realistic enough to know that the market was small and the chances few, so she was planning on pursuing another passion, as well – Environmental Science in the new year at university – majoring in Geology.

I started reading up on all things environmental.

I even contemplated writing a book myself – another thing Tessa and I could talk about (and one of the few things I did not have to lie about) – a book about an orphan boy who goes to wizard school, battles a Sinister Lord and a giant snake, saves his godfather from Soul-Eaters, takes part in a magical tournament... and so on.

The girl at the bookshop with the kind eyes laughed at the absurdity of my imagination.

Tessa wanted to write about people. Normal, everyday people and the way they shaped the world for each other. The way people lived (and died), hurt and loved. She wanted to write fiction that may as well have been reality. To pen a novel that examined the mundane in such a stark clarity that it would leave even the most emotionally dead reader weeping for humanity.

"The kind of people with tired eyes," she told me one afternoon. "I'll write about people with tired eyes. Like yours, Harry."

"I'm up all night reading," I said. Or drinking away things I didn't think about anymore... my scar twinged.

"No, not tired eyes," she said, brushing her hair back behind her ear. "Tired eyes."

I got it. Sure I did. Eyes that knew how fragile the world really was – because they had seen it come crashing down. The look of the broken (the good), the damned (the bad), and the ugly (the ugly).

"Would you like to come to this thing with me Tuesday night, Harry?"

Yes. "Yes."

Tessa laughed. "You don't even know what it is yet."

"If you're there it won't be bad."

A part of me missed the war – a bigger part of me loved this life of carefree fun and respectful abandonment. The thing about my memories, though, is that they never fade. I felt guilty a lot of the time, as I let the world slip away towards an inevitable wasteland of fire and ash.

I was immortal, so what did it matter? I could do this forever.

Tessa took me to a poetry reading at the bookshop after it closed on Tuesday night.

Local writers of all ages were there, and it was her first night offering a piece of her own to the lonely microphone on the tiny stage erected in front of New Fiction and Bestsellers. I think she wanted a familiar face in the crowd, because her gaze kept returning for me, looking for something.

Her poem was fantastic – and sad, very sad. The Scarred Stranger. A short prose about nobody in particular, and how the world could break the best of us for the better, because it's supposed to work that way. It was about loving an idea, about loving someone not because of who they reminded you of, but in spite of who they reminded you of. The poem was about me, and she had sized me up, taken a measure of me, better than folk that had known me for six years.

I kissed Tessa that night in between Horror and True Crime. I was guilty of both, after all...

Matt, Eddie, Suzie and Claire loved Tessa (not as I did, but then I was biased to the nth degree). Tessa loved the idea of the beach shack – and we spent hours together there, strolling out down the beach to Fremantle, wining and dining.

Of course we had sex.

We had sex a lot.

I had succeeded in pushing most of my terrible memories aside – fed them into the warm fires in the back of my mind that whispered strange things in the cold, early hours of the morning (can ya dig it, Harry – maybe yes, maybe no – strawberries and rainfall – hahahahaha...HA!) and that I ignored with the idea of Tessa and her company.

Young and in love created a fire between us that radiated heat enough to blaze for miles. I met her friends, her family... I could almost fool myself into believing this life.

But, of course, I got Tessa killed in the end.

The curtain fell, the darkness ascended, long live the guilty!

Voldemort found us after three years. He had returned from Atlantis at the forefront of a demonic army, infused with the strength of ten thousand years of festering hate. He followed the link in my scar.

To settle old scores.

I fought him. As I always do. We duelled across the city and I did not hold back – unleashing whirlwinds of tempestuous fire, blasting curses and hexes that crumbled skyscrapers and whipped the mighty ocean into a frenzy of boiling agony. The Dark Lord shrugged it all off laughing.

As always, fighting Voldemort was like staring into the heart of the sun – heat, madness, chaos – and it blinded me to all else. Tessa was caught somewhere in the crossfire (probably my own doing) and Voldemort—

"Harry."

—cut my head off in the crackling sand, fused to glass beneath the weight of our spells, and I died enough to—

"Wake, Potter."

—love the idea of Tessa all over again.

I opened my eyes, cleared my throat, and managed to get my back against the wall of the cell in the highest tower of Atlantis. Voldemort stood in the doorway, a cloud of darkness suffocating his presence, visible only to me and those roaring fires that whispered all across my mind.

"Her name was Tessa," I said. She would be alive today, alive and better off without me. I missed her in that moment, as if it were only yesterday we made love in the hammock overlooking the sea. I snorted. That had been awkward work.

"It is time, Harry, to prove your worth."

"Truth is, the good times are worth this." I laughed. "It wasn't all bad, all those other times, Voldemort. I could almost forgive you that... Tessa would forgive you – she was kind like that, in the eyes – but I haven't the mercy." I met his eyes. "You'll learn that soon enough."

"You are babbling nonsense." Voldemort turned into the hallway, leaving the door ajar.

Bellatrix and Alecto Carrow swept into the room, wands pointed at my heart, and jerked me to my feet.

"Walk," Bella spat. Her eyes were hollowed, with great black rings circling them. She twitched and grimaced in every step. After-effects of Cruciatus exposure. Not something that bothered me.

I grinned. "I thought of another one while you were gone," I said. "Cracked bimbo."

She jabbed her wand into my kidney, mumbling and scowling.

I whistled a merry tune out into the hallway, falling into step next to the fucking Dark Lord. I was wandless, unarmed and dazed from fatigue, hunger and torture, but I felt in charge. Everything was going according to plan, what little plan I had, and time was on my side for this.

"Time's my bitch!" I laughed. The dry, coarse sound echoed down the empty, dusty corridors like the breath of a skeletal corpse.

Voldemort kept a wary eye on my every move.

Voldemort and I became two of the most powerful creatures alive for one reason – one simple, awful reason.

We were both convinced beyond any cause and sanity that we were right.

Spiral staircases of once vibrant marble led us up through the heart of the tower. Rooms and dark hallways fled in all directions. Most were locked and shone faintly with residual magic ten millennia old, but we headed up past them all – up to the roof.

Through the crystal ceiling overhead I could glimpse the base of the Vault and the ethereal white light that shone from within the very stone. It was this light we had all first glimpsed upon breaking through to Atlantis, at the very top of this, the highest point in the city. Oh what a terrible day it would be.

We rose in silence, none of us spoke, least of all the Dark Lord. Through the crystal overhead I could glimpse blurred footsteps moving about on the roof plateau – more Death Eaters. I counted at least three pairs of boots. So at least five Death Eaters, Voldemort, and my good self all wandless and alone.

But not defeated. Never defeated.

I was confident in my strategy; in the way the hands on the clock of time would play out the next hour. Anything less than confidence would see me in a grave of endless life. And balls to that.

Still, I felt unnerved as we climbed a black granite staircase, gazing down into a drop of several hundred feet on either side. Feeling unnerved was not part of the plan, yet I had learnt to trust my instincts over the long, long years. Something wasn't right. Something was off. And that meant something was different.

Which was so unlikely that it may as well have been impossible. My head was thumping, the beat of the fiery headache a mock of arrogant laughter, following my every step.

The Dark Lord Voldemort and Harry Potter ascended the sinister tower, I thought as we stepped out into the twilight air atop the crystal rooftop, and lo, behold, they were not alone. A familiar yet unexpected figure stood before the cragged and ruined outer gates of the Vault of Forget.

I missed a step, my eyes narrowed...

"What... is that sadistic son of a bitch doing here?"

It was Chronos, Lord of All Evil!

No, no it wasn't.

Fenrir Greyback bared his teeth and snarled.

"Fenrir is here to ensure your cooperation, Harry." Voldemort ran his fingers down the length of his wand, idly discussing the matter. "His unique talents should make finding your companions a simple task."

Between the pointed brown teeth and the shaggy, greying hair, Fenrir Greyback looked more homeless than dangerous. Yet he was more than human – and less, so much less – and I did not doubt his tracking abilities. This was something I had not accounted for... this was something...

New.

"Clever," I said, staring without blinking into the werewolves' eyes. "Unexpected and clever." I let out a deep breath and turned to Voldemort. "My wand, if you please."

Voldemort paused, as if he had misheard me. "I think not, Harry."

I had underestimated Voldemort in the past – more than once – and he had made the same mistake against me. But this – bringing Fenrir Greyback across the void into Atlantis, this was not something I could have anticipated. The wards surrounding the Shipyards and my battleship in particular did not mask scent. If he got close enough... managed to follow our trail back through the stagnant, still air...

"Yes, my wand," I said, holding out my hand. I didn't know for sure who the other Death Eaters were, standing to the side of Greyback, as they were masked. One of them would be Thorfinn Rowle, most likely, and maybe Amycus Carrow. "I'm going to kill something then open this damn Vault." Heh... heh. "Not necessarily in that order."

Built overlooking the entire city (or perhaps grown from the thought of such a terrible idea), the Vault of Forget was a twisted gateway of obsidian stone and broken rock. A locked portal that shone with a bright clear light that was all at once pale and useless and then blinding and hot. An impossible light in an impossible doorway, bent at all impossible angles and made from impossible stone.

I understood why it appealed to Voldemort, why the very secrets of time and space and all the magic of a lost, mighty civilisation could appeal. Oh but how I wish it had never existed.

"You will tell me how to unlock it, Harry," Voldemort said.

I snorted. "It don't work like that, sunshine. Needs to be quick, clever, or we'll all die. Surely you recognise some of these ward patterns." I gestured to the intricate and archaic runes marring the finish of the ragged gateway. "You may not be able to decipher the runes themselves, but their order, their fashion... do you see the madness in the gate, Voldemort?" I laughed. "Of course you do – you were never an idiot – and that's why you haven't tried to force the lock yourself."

"I am not giving you a wand," the Dark Lord said.

"Then we can stay up here until Judgement Day!" I growled, throwing up my hands. I began to pace back and forth in front of the gate, half a dozen wands trailing my every move. I glared hate at Fenrir Greyback, thinking how best to end his life. "Which actually isn't that fucking far off. Because no effort on your part can force me, Tom Riddle, not a damn thing – send your pet dog after my companions, see if it breaks me." I chuckled. "I've lost them all so many damn times that it makes no fucking difference!"

Was I bluffing? Did it even matter?

"Give me my wand, Tom," I said. "Tom, give me the wand. The wand, Tom, the wand, gimme the wand, Tom, the wand, Tom, gimme the wand—"

"Crucio!"

I groaned and fell to one knee atop of the mighty city of Atlantis, before the Vault of Forget and under the twilit sky, surrounded by none save enemies of the worst sort. I groaned and started to laugh.

"You ugly snake-faced son of a bitch!"

"Crucio!" Voldemort drove the curse home. Oh he meant it, he meant it really, really well.

For as much as it hurt, I embraced the pain, drove it to anger – into the fiery irredeemable Memories – and let it wash away. Magic could be a terrible thing, always a terrible thing, but with enough raw will... garnered over lifetimes of hurt... it could be bested.

I was almost insane enough to believe that for unbreakable truth, yet it was just a theory that broke down in the infinite.

"You need to give me my wand," I said. The Death Eaters all stopped jeering at my pain when I shrugged off the Cruciatus as if it were nothing. Bella didn't even crack a grin. She scowled at me, petulant and beaten. She wanted to eat my heart, of that I could be sure. "Voldemort, for Merlin's sake, I'm surrounded." I grinned. A trickle of blood ran down my chin – I'd bitten my tongue. "How much damage could I possibly do?"

Voldemort regarded me with cold indifference. He stood without moving, as still as a statue. He snarled, flicked his tongue over his lips, and sunk his free hand deep into his robes. "You do not want to test my patience in this matter, Harry." The Dark Lord produced a familiar stick of holly. "Remember you are alone here, surrounded on all sides. There is no one here to die in your place, Potter – do not cross me, do not point your wand at anything except that gateway."

I nodded agreement. Still, Voldemort did not trust me an inch. He approached me and waved his wand. I felt a blanket of harsh magic settle over me and my left arm was drawn up behind my back, bound in place as if someone were twisting it to the point of breaking.

Before he handed me back my wand, Voldemort said, "A thought and I can rip your arm from its socket."

I took a deep breath and accepted my wand. The Death Eaters stirred, keeping me in their sights. I offered what I thought was a friendly enough grin, baring a lot of teeth, and kept an eye on Fenrir Greyback, noting where he was standing... how far from the edge of the tower and a drop of the best part of a mile.

"Let's open up this vault then," I said. "Although I don't think it leads anywhere happy..."

"No more, Harry Potter." Voldemort had stepped back away from me. "Do as I command."

I shrugged. "On your head be it."

An intricate system of pass codes and runic magical learning was required to turn this damn gate into a portal beyond this world, beyond all worlds, and into the realm of the Fae and Forget. I was a deft hand at opening the way, even knew my way down through the bowels of the world-beyond-the world, yet I still felt a moment of trepidation as I began the dark work of unleashing a demonic army that had razed the real world to the ground (to ash and less than ash, oh I could dig it, yes I could) more times than I could remember.

It would take several hours – and at the end, it would still need a vial of starlight to give it that extra push. I had no starlight, not on me, but there should be plenty back on my ship, if Fleur had followed her instructions in the letter...

Once I started it was impossible to stop – the backlash would annihilate, at the very least, most of the city in a two-mile radius. In the olden days and the bright and golden years of Atlantis, before it fell, a team of no less than two dozen highly trained Elder Wizards (men and women of Dumbledore's calibre) would spend days just preparing to breach this Vault.

I was doing it all on my own, racing between runes and ward schemes before they could activate, channelling magic down and into

the alien stone as fast as I could think. It was made no easier by the agony in my left arm, stretched up behind my back.

"You know," I said, directing my wand in quick slashes, carving glowing Atlantean runes out of the very air in a rainbow of colour, "this isn't as easy as it looks. Bet you're wondering where I learnt this, aren't you, Voldemort?"

"There is a lot I have begun to wonder about you, Harry." He paused, standing just on the edge of my peripheral vision. "You are clearly more intelligent than I gave you credit for – yet an accounting of that intelligence must tell you that I am going to kill you."

I nodded. A band of sweat had broken out across my forehead. The stone in the arched gateway was starting to get hot. Some of the runes had come to life and were swirling across the cragged rock – drawn faces screaming across an abyss. The air between the two pillars of curved stone had begun to shimmer, form a heat haze. A way was opening ever so carefully.

"You haven't yet," I said. "You're hesitant – because of the prophecy, because I'm here at all in Atlantis." I laughed. "You don't know what will happen if you kill me."

"I will kill him, my lord," Bellatrix said. I felt her step forward to do just that, but Voldemort waved her away.

"Allow me to cut out his tongue," Greyback said, gnashing his yellowed fangs together.

"I'll get to you in a minute," I said, never taking my eyes off the glowing runes. They were moving faster now, faster and faster. I was anticipating most of them on memory alone, as it came to me. If asked five minutes ago I could not have determined any pattern in this madness, but it was all there – the trial and error of countless lifetimes. I'd been here before.

You can't change the weather, I thought.

Voldemort was suddenly right next to me, leaning in close. He stared into my eyes, flashing with the hot, electric colours of my magic as I poured it into the gateway. I did not look at him, trusted that I would live at least a few more minutes... The Dark Lord watched every move I made, every flick of the wand. He was learning – and learning well.

"Blink and you'll miss it," I said. I was breathing heavier now. The fatigue of days in that cell, the run of mindless torture, the lack of food and water, and the fucking Dark Lord breathing down my neck had begun to take its toll. "Get out of my face, Tom, or I'll skip a beat and this entire tower will come crashing down."

Minutes rolled into an hour, and then another hour. Voldemort remained motionless at my side, saying nothing, as the stone began to harden, to smooth out, and the runes flowed faster and faster. The Death Eaters had grown restless, wandering about and around the crystal rooftop. Yet they kept their wands on me, waiting for the inevitable betrayal.

I had long since lost feeling in my left arm. It was drawn so tight against my back that the circulation was stifled – it had burnt, at first, and then grown cold, and now it was numb. Whether it snapped in its socket or Voldemort released his hold did not matter – that arm was going to be in agony for days when I made my move.

What of Greyback? I wondered. The heat from the vault was hot enough to burn now. It felt as if my eyebrows were smouldering as I added more runes into the maelstrom, buckling the vault's defence system, breaching the gap between worlds. All these decrepit ancient magical devices lying around everywhere... could get a guy killed. Did Chronos have a hand in bringing him here? Did Saturnia? Voldemort has never brought him before – but then, what else had changed?

I could never underestimate the Dark Lord. Not and expect to survive. Perhaps something as little as my baring my teeth in a vicious grin had reminded him of Greyback, of his tracking abilities... It didn't matter. None of it mattered, in the long run, yet I kept trying so goddamn hard anyway.

All of a sudden my weave of runes and magic was complete. The gate thrummed with stored energy, requiring only a single drop of starlight to breach the seal. I tied off my spellwork and delayed the final requirement of starlight for twenty-four hours. The gate would stay active for that long and then either erupt or melt a hole down through the tower and the city unless I provided the final ingredient.

"Well then," I said, keeping an eye on the gate to make it look like I was still working. "Here we go."

I spun on the spot and brought my wand slashing down in a fierce, blurred arc through the air. A blast of magical force rippled outwards from me, knocking Voldemort and his Death Eaters back and I lunged forward in the confusion straight towards Fenrir Greyback.

I had taken three steps before my arm shattered in its shoulder joint, stars of white-hot pain exploded before my eyes, and I fell to my knees. As quick as thought, Voldemort had broken my arm. Motherfucker...

"Avada Kedavra!"

I'd left my back exposed to the Dark Lord, who had of course recovered first from my energy outburst. I rolled to my right, landing on my wand arm, and then across the crystal floor, spinning my wand and muttering mostly silent incantations. Swirling blue shields surrounded me, able to block all but the emerald curse of death.

I mastered the pain in my arm, kept rolling and gained my feet as curses impacted against the misty defences surrounding me, absorbing the spells and spinning faster. I paid none of the Death Eaters any mind, even ignored the Dark Lord, and threw myself at Fenrir Greyback.

The flesh-eating werewolf had seen me coming, his fangs bared in a vicious smile, and as I slammed into his chest – fresh agony shooting down my arm – Greyback lunged almost faster than I could follow and sank his teeth into the soft tissue between my shoulder and neck.

Curses flared all around us, Voldemort was screaming at his followers to kill me, and my blood seeped between the teeth of a killer.

"Fuck. You." I growled. The cloudy twilit sky blurred as I spun on the spot, dragging Greyback with me towards the edge of the tower. It was a long way down, a drop that would kill anyone.

Without hesitating, I hurled myself, still grappling with Greyback, over the edge and into the cool, still air above the city of Atlantis.

In sheer shock Greyback let me go, his bloody mouth opened wide in an 'O' of surprise before he started screaming, clawing for his wand. I spun in the air, curses roaring past on all sides up into the sky, and locked eyes with Voldemort

Before gravity took over and I began to fall to an inevitable death, I laughed and raised my middle finger directly at the Dark Lord's face, keeping a firm grasp on my wand, hollering like a madman.

His expression was priceless – a burst of pure pain tore through my scar. The last jet of green curse light rocketed across the crystal rooftop straight from Voldemort's wand and missed me by the skin of my teeth. I dropped out of sight alongside a demented werewolf.

I fell fast.

Very fast.

Almost as fast as Greyback, who screamed all the way down.

The blackened stone of Voldemort's tower was a blur, the entire city of Atlantis spun all around me as I toppled through the air. The ground was coming up fast, the wind howled in my ears and whipped my torn suit pants around me. I felt bloody and beaten and all out of options.

Memories soared through my mind, desperately searching for something, anything... I was going to die. What the hell could I do? No Apparating in Atlantis, no portkeys or any—

My wand was already acting of its own accord.

I cut a vicious swipe in the air, an oval motion full of purpose, and felt a surge of magic ascend all around me. Invisible magic, powerful magic. At the same time, I could feel a memory rising from the murky depths of time, a terrifying memory... born under a stormy sky...

I was still falling but not as fast. The air was slowing around me. I managed to stop spinning and was jerked up and down before I lost the momentum and began to plummet again. Greyback's screams were still ringing in my ears, yet he had fallen far away now.

"Dear Merlin, what is that?"

I glanced at the rippling storm clouds, fat and bruised, threatening to burst. Thunder rumbled, lightning forked. Something dark and terrible descended from on high, like smoke on the wind, flying on nothing but air.

A snake-like face, a horrible anger and tragic soul... Lord Voldemort flew on the winds without the aid of a broom, screaming his victory at the forefront of an army of demonic bone.

"Huh," I said. "I didn't know he could fly."

The memory snapped into place and I laughed. I made that same vicious swipe through the air, silently cast the right words to make myself aerodynamic (giving a big 'Fuck you!' to the laws of physics at the same time) and suddenly I was airborne!

But I was damned if I knew how to control my newfound ability. More memories flooded my mind, of Voldemort and I duelling across the sky, trading curses under a storm of demons. I had figured out his trick, to fly like smoke on the wind, but I could scarcely remember it now.

The dusty, barren streets of Atlantis came up fast. I surged forward through the air, alight and flying for just a moment, enough to wash

off a lot of speed from my idiotic fall from on high, then lost the knack and slammed home. The empty city welcomed me back with a punch in the face.

I hit the ground hard, very hard, and saw black—

Tessa swung her legs up into my lap and I rubbed my hand up and down her soft feet, tickling her toes. She giggled and swatted my arm.

"You look tired, honey," she said. "More tired than usual."

My scar was on fire, burning across the long nights. Voldemort was literally razing hell back home. It would soon spill over into the Muggle world. This perfect little slice of normality I had stolen for myself down here in Australia would soon come to an end. Tessa, and her beautiful ticklish toes, would soon come to an end...

It was enough to make me cry, but I had not cried in so many years.

"Do you ever wonder," I asked, "what you would do with your life if you had a second chance? Like, if you could go back to when you were younger, but remember everything about your life up to this point, what would you do different, Tess?"

Tessa thought about it, biting her bottom lip and furrowing her brow. She looked real cute when she thought about things. "Yeah, I suppose, but not a lot – it's not ever going to be possible."

I nodded. "You could fix any regrets you might have," I said. "You know, do things differently."

Tessa shrugged. "Perhaps, but if you remember it already, then don't you still have to live with the regret anyway? Even if you fix it the second time around, you still remember it."

The tears were there, just behind my eyes, but they were not to be shed. Not ever. "Let's go to bed," I said, half-forcing the smile on my face. "I don't want to regret ever missing a night with you under the covers."

Tessa's hands roamed down to the buckle on my jeans, roamed over the hardness beneath them. "It's too hot in the house – let's go down to the beach under the stars."

I had to smile. "Yes, ma'am."

—and tasted the rotten dust of a crumbled civilisation. The whole world was spinning and pounding through my head. I had hit the ground hard, landing on my broken arm, hard enough to shatter every bone over again, and hard enough to knock the wind out of me.

I coughed up some blood and rolled over in the dust. I was almost buried in the stuff, amongst the ruins of Atlantis. Through blurred eyes I could glimpse the bright glowing point of Voldemort's tower, a heavy mile or two up and away. I would have to return there soon and finish what I had started. But for now, I had to get moving. I scraped up my wand, wincing a little, and set off.

The Shipyards were a good hour away in my current beaten and broken condition.

Despair will steal your soul in the end, Harry. You know why?

Because God damned it and the Devil don't want it – not as broken as it is.

Despite my days in the cell, the mind and body rape, and my little tumble off the very tippy-top of Voldemort's tower, I felt pretty good as I strode on the gangway and onto the deck of my battleship. The bite that bastard Greyback had given me was still bleeding, but it wasn't as bad as I initially thought. Would probably leave a scar, though.

The dry dock overlooking the barren sea was deserted, no sign of anyone or anything, yet I was sure my companions – beautiful Fleur and sweet Tonks, Jason and Grace – were below deck. I caught a whiff of something cooking that wasn't cold soup and my stomach growled.

The corridor below deck was well lit as I made my way into the galley and to the food simmering on the stove. It was a stew, of sorts, or a curry. Didn't matter which. There was still no sign of my friends and allies, but I could hear them rustling about a deck below in their respective quarters. I scooped a bowl of the curry-stew, it looked cooked enough, and grabbed half a loaf of bread. There wouldn't be much of that left now... soon enough we would be down to canned goods.

It was scoldingly hot, but good – oh so good. I cradled my ruined left arm, missing fingers and all (yeah yeah!), against my chest and devoured the meal before me. I didn't care if I threw it all back up – I needed to eat something.

I could almost feel the warm strength flooding my system. It was the first honestly good feeling in what may have been up to a week. It had been hard to judge time in that cell. But I had survived, which was all that mattered. All that ever matters in this game.

"Harry!"

"Hey, Jason." I glanced up from my bowl. "And Grace. You doing okay?"

Grace took the seat next to me. "Harry, you're half-naked, covered in blood, and look terrible."

"Hospitality of the Dark Lord Voldemort," I said between bites, dunking my bread into the delicious mess. "Leaves something to be desired. Heh."

"Your arm," Grace persisted. "It looks bad."

"Feels worse."

"Tonks!" Jason called. "Fleur!"

I groaned and rose to my feet and headed over to the trunks stacked against the wall opposite the galley and crew dining area. Blue flame torches flickered to life overhead, lighting the storage area. "Which

trunk had all those potions?" I asked myself aloud. "My kingdom for an aspirin..."

"Arry!"

And that voice was like coming home. I felt her soft hands on my back as she turned me around, caught the scent of those fresh strawberries, and smiled with all the care I had left at Fleur Delacour.

She took one look at me and swore in a very colourful mix of English and French. "Come," Fleur said. "You must lie down."

"Merlin, Harry," Tonks whispered. "What did they do to you?"

My smile turned fierce. "Exactly what I planned. Not to worry, Tonks, we're winning."

Was I winning? The line between victory and defeat was a thin one. More than once victory had come at so high of a cost that it may as well have been defeat – and so the world spits my soul back out eight years ago.

Fleur was leading me through the ship toward the individual quarters and I let myself be led. Tonks levitated the medical supply trunk behind us and Jason and Grace stood in careful watch, unsure what use they could be.

"Tell me you've been making starlight like I asked in the letter," I said. My head was spinning from all the motion. "I don't need much, just a vial, enough to break through—"

"Arry," Fleur said, her tone one of strict command, "yes, we 'ave been, but no more! You must rest, you need healing."

I didn't want to argue, so I didn't. There was still so much to do, however, despite how tired I was, how tired I would yet be. Oh you can't change the weather, no sir boss, but you could ride out the storm on the cusp of destiny. Like smoke on the wind. Maybe yes and maybe no... Maybe I did not fucking care.

"My arm hurts..." I managed. There was that familiar encroaching darkness falling over everything again. I was breathing hard, but it sounded so very far away.

"We shall fix you," Fleur promised. She was far away, as well.

I was lowered onto a soft cot and the simple comfort of lying down nearly made me weep. "My head hurts too..." I whispered. And then enough was enough.

Sometimes fighting the darkness is not only futile, but pointless. I let the nightmares descend.

Because they descended whether I was awake or not.

It's a better world with you in it, Harry.

Sincerely yours,

Albus Dumbledore

It was near-dark in my cabin quarters when I awoke.

Soft, faint blue light shone from the torch in its bracket on the far wall against the ship's hull, casting a gentle glow over the room and... its occupants.

"You are awake, 'Arry."

I was not alone in the best way – and I was not in my quarters, but Fleur's, on her bed. Oh my...

"Hello, sweetheart," I said. She had transfigured her cot into a bed large enough for two. We lay parallel to each other, a gap of only a foot between us, on soft covers. "How long have I...?"

"Just a few hours." Her hair shone like pale golden fire in the half-light and she stroked my arm with her fingers, lightly scratching with her

nails now and again. "We forced you to swallow about 'alf a dozen different healing potions. How does your arm feel?"

I felt a lot better – a lot better. My left arm was still sore, but no longer broken. The bones had knitted back together neatly. I was clean, as well, and wearing nothing but a pair of dark boxer shorts. Someone had washed me while I was out...

"I scrubbed all ze blood away," Fleur whispered, reading my mind. "There was so much, 'Arry..."

Pages torn from the book of hope, honey, I thought. "It's not all fun and games, you know."

"I do now," she said quietly, shuffling in closer. "They shaved your head?"

I nodded. "Look a little strange bald, huh?"

"I liked your messy hair. It made you look mischievous."

I chuckled, "Oh very well...", and concentrated hard, reaching for the magic. I'd done this all the time as a kid and in other lives, subtly altering my appearance. A touch of metamorphmagus abilities, yet only for my hair. A tingling shivered over my scalp and a familiar black fringe fell over my eyes. "Better?"

Fleur laughed, delighted. "There's my, 'Arry Potter."

Fleur's presence was damn-near intoxicating. I didn't know if I was light-headed from the last agonising few days or from the fact we were lying in bed together. My memories were strangely silent on what I was meant to do next, screwing me over as usual, so I just settled my good hand on Fleur's hip, atop her tight white blouse.

"Did you fight him?" she asked. "Ze Dark Lord?"

"A little," I replied. "It's not over yet."

"Is eet ever over for 'Arry Potter?"

I laughed. I also slipped the hand on top of Fleur's shirt under the fabric. Her skin was warm against my palm. "This time counts for all, Miss Delacour."

"When are we going home? Zis place... Atlantis. I feel like it is dying all around me, all the time."

I nodded. "It is." And in a few days (or months, depending on the flow of time in the realm of the Fae and Forget) I would deliver the deathblow. "And soon, very soon."

Fleur closed the gap between us and kissed me. Her weight was comfortable as it settled against my side, her leg feather-light as she entwined it with mine.

I kissed her back, pulling her closer against me. The friction between our bodies was something always to be desired, the willingness of that presence, the heat of the moment... I sighed against Fleur's mouth and we let ourselves wander.

As it was in all moments of either abject terror or sheer pleasure, the festering memories in my head began to stir, lives upon lives worth of the good, the bad, and the ugly (broken and damned, if I may be so kind). I saw Fleur in a thousand different ways across a thousand different worlds. There she was at midnight in a dress as red as blood, waiting for a man who carried Time in his pocket and a god-complex in his head. In a garden wearing a sundress we laughed and drank iced tea. Wasn't that this life? It didn't matter.

Moments are meant to bleed. They're meant to move and shake and shatter... The fragile glass is meant to fly!

I removed Fleur's blouse, undid the buckle on her jeans and pulled—caught on her flat shoes, she kicked them off — and the raw heat intensified. She was so light, so lithe and beautiful, yet the raw presence of her was enough to weigh me down with desire strong enough to buckle all thought, all time.

And then Fleur was on top of me. I scraped my nails down her back, reaching for her bra strap. The heat was stifling, breathless, always in that damned best way. She was careful of my barely healed body, my arm in particular, but I held no such notions about taking care of myself – we grinded against one another, still separated by thin pieces of black fabric and purple silk where it mattered most.

How the day can change in a heartbeat, I remembered thinking. Barely twelve hours ago I was bound and chained to the floor of a bloody cell. Don't think on that... Now, now I was underneath a French goddess, a touch of veela akin to the Sirens of old, and no force in this or any other world was going to stop us from taking what we wanted from each other...

The beautiful in life.

There was passion in our moves, in our hearts and minds, yet there was no sense of urgency. We were sharing comfort with one another, absolutely nothing less, more so than a need to draw the raw pleasure that inevitably rises from our act.

I don't remember working the bra strap but suddenly Fleur's nipple was in my mouth, a hard little pebble, and she was moaning against me, her hair a curtain of that passion hidden within the comfort. Her breasts were perfect, round and soft. I spent a lot of time admiring them.

Fleur pushed me back and kissed my chest, mindful of the fading bruises. She ran her fingers down the scar over my heart, Chronos' doing, and the crescent stab wound scar in my side, courtesy of Saturnia. It felt as if she were erasing them, undoing the damage. They were all worth one moment of Fleur's affection.

Did I deserve her affection? Had I earned this moment, these feelings? Maybe yes and maybe no.

"Arry... oh..."

We were forged through blood and circumstance, as close as two people could be given the nature of our lives. This was where it led, where it was meant to be.

Time moved quickly, far too quickly, and I was between Fleur's legs, her feet up behind my shoulders, and kissing her warmth through the violet silk she wore.

I find myself caring what you think...

"Mmm..."

Games like mine all too often have a beginning, middle, and end wrought in bloodshed. Nothing can ever be resolved without it. It is the way of the universe.

And then I was still between her beautiful legs, but on my knees. My boxer shorts were gone and Fleur met my eyes, her face and body shimmering with sweat, and thrust herself forward to meet my length. I let out a long, desperate breath – the weight of the world lifted for just a heartbeat – and slipped inside Fleur Delacour.

All the starlight in Creation threatened to explode in my head – I was warm, hot enough to burn, and the feeling was tight, the pressure surrounding my length all-consuming. Fleur's lips welcomed me down, her hair spread about the pillow like strands of spun-gold scattered across the clouds, and we kissed hard as we made love.

Hey Jude, don't make it bad... take a sad song... and make it better – remember, to let her into your heart, then you can start, to make it better...

I had been here before, with Fleur, and I hoped to be here again – many, many times. This was our first time, if you trust that Time only flows one way and that's the law, set in stone and unbreakable. I prayed to gods that did not exist that this would be our last first time. For what it's worth, I don't think it mattered, and that it never would.

I lifted Fleur's leg up and rested her ankle on my shoulder, getting a better angle as we moved our hips back and forth. I turned and

kissed her foot, gently bit her toenails, and held her leg, the entire length of it running up my chest, against me. So deliciously warm... so many feelings... I had ached for this.

We rolled and Fleur was on top again, her loose hair tickling my nose. She moved against me, moaning softly, and I grasped her buttocks, pulling her down harder. She responded with a whimper of pleasure, one hand cupping her own breast, biting her bottom lip. Seeing that almost sent me over the edge.

But I had lifetimes worth of restraint, of patience. I wasn't about to let this end so quickly. Not when it felt so good and not when I had to disappear again all too soon, back to the Dark Lord's tower.

'Arry Potter. Do I look like I need rescuing, hmm?

There were always reasons to break – even hope was a complex enough reason to break. This was one of those moments, lost inside Fleur Delacour, our breathing tightening towards the end, where I wanted to break, wanted to let down my guard and allow the world to rise or fall as it would. Unswayed by the influence of the guilty and the powerful.

Of which you are both, Harry. What was her name again? They die for you, Harry. They all die for you.

I could've been on a beach in sunny Australia right now, reading books and sipping a cold, frosty beer. But I wasn't. I was here, at the forefront of a horrifying war, but it wasn't all bad... no, sir, not at all. Fleur whispered my name deep in the back of her throat and I bucked with satisfaction.

All good things come to some sort of end, and together Fleur and I were about to reach it, as one – to finish together, a rare almost impossible moment, and all the better for it. We thrust ourselves together, Fleur responding to the change that swept over me, instinctively knowing I was falling over the precipice of mindless oblivion, and eager to help me fall. I loved her for that – I loved her for many reasons.

"Oh... Fleur!"

We descended into pleasure... and into the desperate arms of one another, alone together before the colossal, silent end of entire worlds.

Game on.

I landed on the crystal plateau to find the Dark Lord alone, staring into the spinning vortex of light and magic that was the Vault of Forget. Crackles of lightning spun off from the rock, scoring the crystal underfoot and a low sound, almost below hearing, buzzed and screamed incessantly.

It was time.

Sensing my presence, Voldemort turned with his wand at the ready. He let out a long, careful breath, beholding me beneath the unchanging sky. "Who taught you how to fly?"

Memory flickered like burning parchment on the wind. Her name was Tessa... I'll buy the beers... you can't change the weather... a weak week spent half-asleep... when are we going home?

"You did." I shook my head clear and held up a single vial of liquid starlight – volatile enough to end the world. "You ready for this?"

"What has happened to you, Harry?" Voldemort asked. He almost sounded afraid.

"Time." The word echoed down through the city and settled like a death shroud over everything. "Time, Voldemort, always and forever Time."

A storm was brewing over the horizon. An impossible storm. The end game was about to begin, the realms of the Forgotten awaited, and I stood opposite my nemesis with all the fury left to me.

I sniffed and uncorked the vial. "Time to go."

A/N: Just between you and me, the events in this chapter were long overdue. Thanks once again for reading, folks, please leave a review. New Year's resolution is to get back to the gym (you, me and how many others? Heh), and to finish this darn story soon. Although a word on resolutions from our friend Mark Twain:

'Now is the accepted time to make your regular annual good resolutions. Next week you can begin paving hell with them as usual.'

Ouch. That's the key to writing, folks – say a lot in as fewer words as possible. A handful more chapters to go, maybe about five or six, with a sequel on the horizon if I pull this one off. Ah, and we're about to breach 1,500 reviews! 2k is the mark I'm shooting for by the end of the story... nudge, nudge...

Cheers,

Joe

Chapter 25 – The Sleeping God

You have enemies? Good. That means you've stood up for something,
sometime in your life.

~Churchill

Expect... anything.

Just tumblin' down the rabbit hole, boss.

That's the best way of putting it.

Portals between worlds are not meant to exist. They are wrong. They break the rules of reality and shift the impossible into overdrive, giving all that exists a shove toward that deliberate uncertainty found only in dreams. Travelling through one is painful. It's like getting shoved through a keyhole ass-backwards – or like getting a blowjob from a blender. Yeah... It just don't feel right.

It's moments like these that I do all I can to stop time.

Atop of Lord Voldemort's tower in the Lost City of Atlantis, standing before the Vault of Forget, swirling with crackling crimson energy straining between the obsidian pillars of arched stone, I held a thin vial of cool starlight. I knew what I had to do. I knew it.

Yet I paused.

I hesitated with the eyes of mass murderer staring me down. We were all mass murderers 'round these parts.

"What are you waiting for, Potter?"

I chuckled, tilting my head to the side, gazing into the unstable vortex before me, keeping Voldemort in the corner of my eye. "Just making sure I can do this." Again. "Could be ending the whole wide world here by using this starlight."

"A touch dramatic." Voldemort leant his head back and disappeared into the darkness of his hooded robes. There was always a sinister, unknown quality to the Dark Lord. It made him dangerous – unpredictable. "You want to do this. I can see it in your eyes, in the set of your shoulders. You desire this as much as I, Harry."

That was true, but how many more storms could I face? You can't change the weather, buddy... "It's worse than you think," I said. "Through this gate, Voldemort, is nothing but the suffering realms of dead gods." I intend to make sure of it. "No good can come of this."

"Harry, Harry." I felt the Dark Lord's grin from within the shadows of his hood. "Fear not. You are with the greatest wizard of the age. No harm shall come to you, I promise."

"Oh fuck off." I laughed. "Was that a joke?" It broke my hesitation. With very little fanfare, I tossed the sparkling vial of light into the burning maelstrom of suffering-yet-to-come. Born to run, Springsteen, don't ever doubt that.

The effect was sudden and deadly. The roiling, screaming bands of crimson energy absorbed the starlight and grew still. Calm, blue light, as soft as the sky at the height of summer formed across the invisible surface of the portal. A cool reflective mirror of potent energy, connecting this world to another, and bypassing the real world entirely.

A world within a world outside the world, I thought, but that didn't even come close to understanding what this portal had done. What I had done... down in a dead man's town.

"Is that it?" Voldemort asked. He sounded eager.

I judged his mood – whether or not he was going to try and kill me and claim the portal for himself. I would be a fool to disregard the possibility. An insane fool in a bloody two thousand dollar Armani suit. "Sure, go ahead and step into it. See what happens. Let's see how immortal you really are, Lord Voldemort."

The Dark Lord was silent for a long minute, waving his wand in slow circles before the portal, trying to discern its nature. He would not succeed. It was beyond understanding. It just... was.

"After you, Harry," my nemesis finally said.

I tipped an imaginary hat to the snake-faced son of a bitch. "Wands at the ready then." I stepped toward the portal. It was cold. Very cold. "And smile - where we're going, there be monsters!"

I dived headfirst into the calm, clear waters of the Vault of Forget and somersaulted all the way down through the blowjob-blender, ass-backwards keyhole of eternity.

Moments of clarity come to me now, amidst the screaming and the bleeding.

—The tearin' and the swearin', YEEHAW, never say never you can't change the fuckin' WEATHER!—

Terrible moments of mercifully brief understanding that make me remember the cost. Remember what was lost – and how little I sold my soul for. There had to be a better bet than this.

—Bet, bet, bet not over YET this is not my favourite song but the list goes on and on and if YOU were HERE I'd buy the BEERS—

On matters of clarity, it is no secret that I fear them more than the madness. I have a conscience in the clarity, the last dregs of a soul, and the weight of what I have done is unbearable. I need to die, but death only makes things worse...

"Ah...ow."

It was dark and humid when I landed at the top of an archaic staircase, runes of great power chiselled into the grey stone, and lances of sheer impossible agony shooting through every nerve in my body. I huddled shaking in a tight ball, biting back the pain, and

waited for Voldemort. He would be right behind me, but time was different here, as it was in Atlantis, as it was back home.

What was only seconds in the above world of Atlantis was fifteen minutes in the dark for me. I managed to get a grip on the pain in that time, and stood lounging against the heavy stone wall, twirling my wand, when the Dark Lord stepped sideways out of infinity.

Voldemort showed no sign of discomfort as he stepped into existence, regarding me silently in the darkness. The runes on the steps leading down, and scattered across the walls, shone with pulsating electric-blue light. It was calming, in a 'you're-fucked' kind of way.

"This resembles the city," Voldemort said, taking in the surroundings. "Do you know where we are, Potter?"

"Outside of time and space, scattered to the far corners of the unknown multiverse, and about..." I bit my tongue and waved my wand in slow circles. "...about one universe, two worlds, three continents and one hundred and forty-seven miles from the nearest pub."

"The realms of the Fae and Forget."

"Shit's about to get real," I agreed. "It looks normal now... but we're heading down a path to the very heart of Time itself. The Infernal Clock, Voldemort." I had dark and terrible plans for that Clock. "It stands at the heart of this and every world and watches the patience of the universe. Power to be had, you murdering asswipe, and we'll only get there if we work together."

Voldemort regarded me in silence. "You did more than I thought possible, Harry, in opening the way here. I have no further use—"

"Don't be fucking stupid," I said calmly, keeping my cool leaning against the wall. "You won't make it out of this place without me. You'll get your chance to kill me soon enough. Right now our interests are aligned. Trust me, you'll get more than you ever desired from this quest..." And I'll be ready to take it all from you.

"What are you after, Harry? Why Atlantis? Why aid me in opening the way?" The Dark Lord paused. "You have an agenda here, and I warn you, however clever you may think you are, I will destroy you should you get in my way."

"Dooming yourself to an eternity in a dead world beyond all rational understanding?"

"I am Lord Voldemort. I have bested death itself. I will find a way without Harry Potter."

A tense silence fell over both of us, sealed away in a tiny corridor at the top of this shiny staircase. There was no way to go save down. There were no gates this side of the portal. There was no portal anymore. The Vault had sealed us inside. Far too late to back out, to call it a day, and expect to live. It was move forward or die.

"Immortality is a curse," I said into the silence, not looking at Voldemort but through him, back into all the wasted years. God, but I had lived for so long. All I had to show for it was a headache and an impossible tiredness. "You deserve it."

"Yes, I do, and you have helped me today, Harry." Voldemort laughed. "Shall I offer you a swift death?"

"If only you could." I let out a slow, deep breath. "Come on, let's go, before this conversation gets anymore awkward and I start talking about my feelings and you tell me how you really wanted to be a strawberry farmer when you grew up."

"You first, Harry."

I shrugged. The heels of my fine Italian shoes clicked against the stone as I descended the rune-coated staircase. The harsh slashes and vicious strokes of coloured light blazed beneath my feet. No one had walked these stairs in ten thousand and more years. Only a handful had ever walked them before even then.

The staircase narrowed as I descended with the Dark Lord at my back. We walked in silence, terrible silence, and time passed. How

much time didn't matter, as hours or days had already gone by in Atlantis. It would be four, maybe five, months before Fleur saw me again. Tonks, Jason and Grace, as well.

I grinned in the flickering shadows, remembering the time spent with Fleur only an hour or so ago to me. In bed alone. Naked. Heh... fond memories. I hoped to create more such memories one day soon. Sweating, nasty, passionate memories. Anything to numb the raging torrent of agony that beat a steady pulse through my skull.

"There will be three challenges before we're through," I said into the darkness.

"Challenges?"

"Nothing this good is ever easy, Voldemort." The staircase was widening again. We were nearing the base, although it was still several miles below. A faint red light – like hearth's fire – warmed the walls and bathed everything in a pale crimson glow. "Three challenges – for each of us. The Fae and the Forget demand payment for passage, and they accept strange currency indeed... Blood, sweat and tears – the cost of experience, the price of defiance."

"Tests of magical strength?" Voldemort asked. "This will not be an obstacle, if it proves true."

I ignored his posturing. Hopefully, this time, the challenges would kill him. They had killed me times beyond count, but then Voldemort was different. Half in and half out of the worlds anyway. Dead but not dead, alive but not alive. He hadn't felt a thing stepping between worlds, not a damn thing.

I had to remind myself that this was the only way. The only way to get home from Atlantis, the only way to ensure Voldemort lost most of what he gained from the damn city, and the only way to save the world... to give it a fighting chance, at least.

I could no longer taste Fleur on my lips.

"Three challenges designed to drive the sanity from your mind and push your resolve beyond all endurance." I chuckled. "I don't even want to think about the fucked up shit you're about to see."

"This was all written in the tomes you destroyed in my library, wasn't it?" Voldemort said. "That is how you are doing this – how you know more about this magic than I."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night." I frowned. "Or whatever it is you do."

"Potter, you are a fool to tread lightly with magic as ancient as this. It will get you killed, in the end."

"I know," I said, waving away what could almost be mistaken as concern from the Dark Lord. It wasn't. He was simply marvelling at my stupidity. Couldn't really fault him on that. "A lot of the time, I'm actually counting on it. To die would be a relief."

"You will not survive my war against the Wizarding World."

Descending toward battle and glory, toward power sequestered within the heart of the very universe, my laughter echoed off the runes and the stone like bones rattling in the stagnant swash of a diseased ocean.

"So much absurd power for so little a thing." I laughed so hard I felt tears in the corner of my eyes. "Oh, you and I are fools both. We deserve each other, and we deserve nothing."

"Is your mind addled, Potter?"

"Born down in a dead man's town, Voldemort." I strummed a few chords on my air guitar. "And Hey Jude, don't let me down..."

I could no longer taste Fleur on my lips. And that was a sad, sad thing.

At some point... I just started going through the motions.

Fighting for the sake of fighting. Waging war for the sake of war.

My heart just ain't in it these days.

Time.

Is relative.

I come from the rubble of a burning home. I survived on the love of another, and have known nothing but war and the brief respites between war – before suffering faux-death on the wings of all that is relative.

Into the river you dived, Harry.

At the bottom of the rune-encrusted staircase, Lord Voldemort and I entered Hell under a twilit sky. The corridor widened into a vast cavern, so impossibly far underground, with a ceiling of stretched azure cascading over a distant horizon.

It was dusk in the heart of the world.

"Impressive," the Dark Lord said.

A road of dusty limestone curved through the cavern, cutting through the vast rolling flames that scorched the land. There was no heat, no sound. Just silent fire swaying like long grass against the coast. And a sky of twilight – always and forever – endless twilight.

Twilight is the milk of the cosmos, Harry, said that tittering voice in the back of my head. The voice that sounded so much like my own. And yes, her name was Tessa!

"Very impressive," I agreed, but something wasn't right. This was new. I had never encountered this amazing vista, these fields of roiling silver flame, before. Anything new was to be regarded with the upmost fear. A thin black cloud, miles away in the distance, moved against the silent wind toward us. "Oh darn, that's not a cloud."

Voldemort followed my sight and regarded the apparition with silence. He was the silent sort, old Voldemort, for the most part. There was

fear in silence. Unknown mercies, too, but they were few and far between. "It is alive, whatever it is," the Dark Lord finally said.

Closer now, I could glimpse the twilight reflected off dull – perhaps rusted – metal in the cloud, swarm, of whatever. I had a sneaking suspicion... oh shit. "Get off my lawn, you sons of bitches..." I whispered, tightening my grip around a wand that was soon to be ineffective.

Across the blasted plains of Forget, under the twilit sky of Fae, the swarm of creatures blazed above the swaying flame and rose on torrents of air thirsting for my blood. Behold the Fae and Forget, behold the end of worlds, and behold the fucking bane of my existence at my side – the Dark Lord Voldemort.

"What are these creatures?"

"I don't know... but they've been trying to kill me for weeks. I don't know how they do it, but their presence somehow cancels my magic."

"That is impossible."

"Nothing is impossible. Especially not here." There were at least thirty of the creatures, rusted swords aimed for my heart. Tweedledums and Tweedledees, courtesy of Lord Chronos – the Undead Bastard. I laughed. "Merlin save me, you'll have to protect me, Voldemort, if you want to make it out of here."

What a hopeless turn of events...

"Save my life tonight, Tom, someone better save my life tonight..."
Passing hours of evening showers, boss. "You really can't change the goddamn weather."

Crimson lightning forked across the cloudless sky. I laughed to its beat as three dozen Orc-Mare descended from on high to murder me. To murder me good and dead.

And if you're wondering what the final cost of this game will be, then you are not alone.

The cost... is blood. Oceans of blood. Women and children first. Then the guilty. Too many people die for me.

There are times when I need to take a step back and analyse a situation based on the wisdom of past experience, of memories from the Dream before. But what is there really left to examine, save shattered remnants of the past?

Remnants that I scarcely remember, that come to me in fits and bursts of terrible power and unacceptable failure. Is it enough to recall the world ending time and time again, if I'm only doomed to repeat it? More nightmares come to me now – more than I've ever had. They speak of horrors to come, of failing for the last time, and damning the world and everything in it to darkness eternal.

So I have to take a step back and see the little people – they may be young, yeah yeah – see the choices made anew each time, and the hefty fucking fee to be paid once more. It does well to remember the remnants of the past now that I'm faced with death on all sides – and my one true nemesis all that stands between me, and complete and utter annihilation in time.

"Fire seems to work well on these beasties," I offered Voldemort some words of wisdom – voice of experience, that's me. "They work in pairs, mostly, so—"

"Incendios Grata!" Voldemort pointed his wand into the heart of the swarm of Orc-Mare, silhouetted against melting azure twilight, and a torrent of flame as thick as I was tall burst forth against the storm.

The backlash of heat was incredible and I had to step away from Voldemort, my wand hanging useless at my side, as the flame split and split again. Four columns of raging fire ascended to meet the Orc-Mare halfway. The creatures scattered before the flame, but it surged through the air after them, chasing and burning upon the whim of the Dark Lord.

Voldemort merely stood with a fierce grin on his face, having not even broken a sweat. His wand was already moving again, cutting harsh

lines through the air. He cast silently this time, and a concussion blast of force threatened to knock me back as liquid fire – as black as night – erupted all around the Dark Lord.

The coils of flame swirled about his form, spiralling up and up. They were deathly cold, impossibly alive. Faces danced within the flames – of creatures and demons and all manner of dark things. It was some sort of fiendfyre. I had vague memories of seeing it before.

Just to be sure I had a handle on this whole situation, I attempted to cast some similar fiery death. "Incendios Grata!" Not even a single spark ignited from the tip of my wand. It was maddening, frustrating to the point of stupidity. Whatever these creatures were, and I had my ideas now, their presence made me that much more mortal.

Voldemort was having no concerns. His fire and his fyre were lancing through the air in thin beams of radical destruction. When they struck an Orc-Mare, the creature simply disintegrated – becoming so much ash on the wind. I stepped back to admire the Dark Lord's handiwork.

If nothing else, Voldemort was a skilled practitioner of the dark arts. Half the reason I had so much trouble defeating him. Other half was the power of Atlantis and the raggedy mess he called a soul.

The Orc-Mare burst like balloons in midair. Not a single one of them got within thirty feet of me. I could smell them cooking – havin' a barbeque, boss, yes sir – and I knew, felt it in me bones, that Chronos was watching nearby.

"Where are you...?" I whispered. There was so much fire in this world – so much burning. Yet very little ash. "What are you...?" A much better, much more terrifying, question.

That Chronos had followed me to Atlantis I did not doubt. That he had followed Voldemort and I through the Vault of Forget I did not doubt. Whatever he was, different rules seemed to apply. I had burned him alive and he had simply regenerated. I had sensed in him... lengths of time that even I felt small against. An agent of chaos, he had said, but then what was chaos?

Save time – True Time. Chaos was crystal shards of all that time ever was. It did not exist and yet was all that mattered. Woe be to the few who could wade its currents and not be swept away. I had never been too clever about that.

"I've killed a dozen or more of those things," I told Voldemort as the last of his magical fires faded away. That aura of darkness surrounding his form had not been disturbed. Powerful. Very. Fucking. Powerful. Even before the saturation of dominance that was heading our way. "Yet they keep coming back. Without going into too much detail, you saw for yourself, I can't magic worth a damn when they're close."

"I did not recognise them from any bestiary."

I shook my head. "I didn't either, way back a few weeks ago when they first attacked." Above the Falls of Tivoli. "Which means they're something new, because I've seen everything – or at least I thought I had – the world has to offer. Time and time again. New is scary..."

"Tell me what this place is, Potter." Voldemort gestured to the rolling fields of cool flame. It felt like mid-evening, but much like Atlantis, I didn't think this place really measured time with the hands of a clock... or the mere rise and fall of a star.

I looked up at the sky, out across the horizon, and down to the powdery limestone at my feet. "This is Forget, Voldemort, and we are not alone. Quick, tell me, what time is it?"

I laughed aloud as the ground cracked and wicked silver lightning burst forth from the centre of the world. The fields of fire were consumed in arcs of sheer raw strength – of pure magic, undiluted, the ascending oils that turned the cogs in some unimaginable universal timepiece – and the twilit sky descended into night.

I blinked and Voldemort and I stood in some place I did recognise. The Orc-Mare, that world of fire, must have been Chronos' doing. I guess he was in a killin' mood today. Show your face, you bastard...

"That... is impressive," Voldemort said, gazing over my shoulder.

I turned and followed his gaze. We stood on green earth, pale and hallowed under the starry night sky, at the base of a deep and untouched valley. It had a touch of Fae about it, this place, but it was of neither lost realm – nor was it of Atlantis. This was a way station, an in-between world in between worlds.

From the crest of the valley rose steep cliffs, over a mile high and masked in low cloud. They stretched for miles all around, effectively sealing Voldemort and I within the valley. Impressive in its own right – the sheer size and beauty – yet it was not what drew Voldemort's attention.

"The Cascading Falls of Reality," I said, barely above a whisper. The sight of it still stirred feelings within me – mostly of regret, but also of respect... for the power that had created such a sight.

From the top of the cliffs, from some unseen font beyond all sight and knowledge, unfathomable amounts of star-speckled water flowed over the height of the ridge and descended into our valley, deep and far away. The noise was faint at this distance, but near deafening up close. More arcs of that silver lightning danced within the swash and foam of the tumbling water.

"This is our first test, Tom." I laughed again. "Ghost of Christmas-Future kind of crap. Drink from the Falls and submit yourself to Time, to the could'a, would'a, should'a of uncertain realities." I shrugged. "Best high in all the worlds, to be honest, like trippin' acid and drinking Skittle-Brau."

"The waters are tainted with a magical euphoria?"

I nodded. If I could bottle it and take it home, then Fleur and I would have one helluva party when I got back... "We're gonna regret not bring funions and Coco Pops for when this shit kicks in. Mark my words, Voldemort, mark them well."

Sorry. I'm so sorry, Fleur.

Just been too busy writing a tragedy.

I always find myself hesitating in these between worlds – these realms outside of proper time and proper space, existing in nothing between one moment and the next. I hesitate even though it could get me killed. I hesitate because to charge blindly forward will surely get me killed.

The realm we were in did not exist. Not in any normal sense of the word. The Cascading Falls of Reality were before us, still many miles away, yet the sparkling foamy water lapped at a vast shore right at our feet.

It was warm and damp, painfully humid, in this place that did not exist – that was magic and thus impossible. A sip of water would go down just right...

"We'll be separated," I told Voldemort, kneeling down on my haunches before the waters. "But all roads lead to the Clock, should you make it through the mind-rape."

I felt the cool, calm wood of Voldemort's wand settle against the back of my neck. There was a thin charge of electricity from the pressure, and my scar – burning like a mo'fo – twitched all the more. "You have become too dangerous to be left alive, Harry."

I didn't turn or make any move against the wand. "I know," I said. "Oh I know... I think the universe has been trying to tell me the same thing." I had a think about my options. "But consider this – we are here on my dime, you dumb fuck. If I die, the way ahead, and the way back... it'll all go up in a puff of ironic smoke."

"Are you lying to me, Harry?" I could feel the heat of magic against my neck. Voldemort had slit my throat not too long ago – now he was flaying the damn skin off my neck. "Lord Voldemort knows. He always knows."

"You dick around in my head and you'll be left drooling and raving against the walls."

Voldemort removed his wand from my collar. Warm blood, fresh and free, flowed under my shirt and down my back. An old familiar feeling. I'd grown to love it. Wasn't doing my job right if someone or something wasn't making me bleed.

"You drink first, Harry."

I cupped my hands and placed them below the surface of the gently lapping water. Crystal sparks spun through my fingers. The Cascading Falls all that distance away vibrated through the cool, clear liquid. Almost at once I lost feeling in my fingers – numb and useless.

"Ever the brave leader, Voldemort," I said with a sneer. "How you ever got anyone to follow you is beyond me."

"My servants believe in the purification of the Wizarding World, Potter. The arrogance of fools such as Dumbledore and yourself have stymied and delayed progress for far too long."

"And the world would be a better place if we were all terrorists, hmm?"

"The line between terrorist and freedom fighter is naught but a matter of perspective, Harry."

I could hear the slow, unshakable certainty in the Dark Lord's voice. It made me feel sick. I didn't turn to face him, keeping my focus on my submerged hands. "Drawn in the blood of the innocent. And your side quest for immortality? Just a means to an end then?"

"My work will require more than one lifetime's worth of sacrifice. I intend to see it through."

We had had this conversation before. I had vague recollections of all the arguments and counter-arguments. Then the bloodshed that inexorably followed. There was no reasoning, no surrender – neither of us would give an inch.

"Don't be so sure on that timeframe. Where we are now – the power and the understanding that is to come... it'll speed things up to the point where the entire world will have to burn because of our choices." I raised my hands out of the water, cupping a few mouthfuls of raw magic – the ascending oils of the universe. "Let me drink to your health, Lord Voldemort."

I drank from my hands, only a few sips, but more than enough to get this whole show on the road. Already a cold, encroaching numbness fled through me. Standing, I turned to face the Dark Lord.

"Follow me if you dare..."

The water did its trick and my entire body, all that remained of my soul and essence, was torn asunder in a fall of cascading silver sparks. From magic we are born, and into magic we return...

The memories were about to rise – an unstoppable, titanic force of well-honoured guilt and regret – borne on the shattered remnants of the past. Borne on those ruined and twisted Wastelands of Time.

'bout that time, ain't it?

"Please don't die," I said softly, carefully, with only half a heart. I brushed a gentle strand of sunburst hair back behind her bloody ear. "Be safe, Fleur Delacour."

Her breathing slowed and then stopped. No more battles raged about us – the world was desperately silent. But I was fooling myself if I thought that meant any divine understanding had marked the passing of the woman I loved. Loved and lost... so many times.

Didn't there have to be a limit to what I could stand? I guess not.

The blood-drenched grounds of Hogwarts were littered with corpses and less than corpses. The castle burned at midday, a single solitary black flag striking the Dark Mark swaying in the breeze above a ruined white flag tarnished with an electric-blue lightning bolt.

I had been here before. I would be here again. But not this life – this time counts for all. The presence of so much uncertainty and my inability to stomach even brief jaunts back and forth with the Time Turner claimed a testament to the end of all things.

With that thought, veracity shifted, the Cascading Falls of Reality sent me further downstream, and the warm body I held in my arms disappeared along with the very sky. There was a swirl of colour and sound, akin to portkey travel, and sure enough the rabbit hole was that much deeper, just that much more insane.

"You are driven by a search for meaning, Harry," Dumbledore said. As with all our deep conversations, they either occurred here in his office, or on the cusp of death. "To understand the cost and be held accountable for all you have done."

I sat in the chair opposite his desk, real but unreal, and gazed around at the cacophony of magical devices, at Fawkes and the paintings of headmasters from long ago. I had to play this reality out to proceed through the Falls, to reach the Infernal Clock...

"All I have done has been to win peace," I said. "To force a madman into surrender by taking off his head."

"How did you do it?" my old headmaster asked. No twinkle, no old grandfatherly mannerisms today. "You have come to me and explained how you have changed, Harry, how you have lived and died this war times beyond count. How did you do it the first time? What drove you to it?"

I shrugged. "Death, for the most part. You were dead... all of you were dead. The world was in ruin; the sky was falling, the oceans... fading away. There was nothing but the Dark Lord on his dark throne and a constant stink of rotting flesh on the wind. I was alone, wandless, walking the barren earth. I did what anyone would have done, Albus – I killed myself."

"And woke up some eight years ago in the body of your fifteen year old self?"

"That part may have had something to do with the deal I struck with Lady Time, the Infernal Clock, deep beneath the city of Atlantis in the flowing rivers of raw magic that swim through all worlds lost and found."

"Atlantis?" Dumbledore cocked a single eyebrow. That had his attention.

"Voldemort found it, or was drawn to it – but that first time, my first life, it was too late to stop him from bringing it all back to our world. The gateway was still open, and all manner of demon traffic and nightmare seed crossed over. Hence that disagreeable business of the world ending in dust and rot." As it most often did. "I travelled back across the bridge to Atlantis, searching for anything I could use against him... I found a Vault. The Vault of Forget."

"And then...?"

The world was beginning to fade. Currents were sweeping me on through the haunting memory. How much longer would I have to wallow in my unavoidable failures? "And then the rest is history, Professor, albeit history only I will ever remember."

I felt a shift in the current – away from memory and away from regret. This whole world of Forget, deep beneath the Lost City, could only invade my mind so far. There were layers so deeply repressed that even my lucid insanity would run fleeing into the comforting arms of terrible, final madness to avoid.

It felt like I was rising, swimming upstream. All was dark amidst rivulets of colour until I reached the light at the end of the tunnel – only to find it populated with horrors.

In a daze, a stupor of wonder-drugs, I stepped down onto dusty grey stone inside a ruined coliseum of indecent marble arches and empty amphitheatre seating. Bruised storm clouds raged overhead, grumbling with thunder and threatening a tempest of colossal intent.

The water I had swallowed was only part of my dizziness. The rest was the headache, thrumming a beat so loud now that it would've

been quieter in the heart of an explosion, and the memories that had been jostled loose by the journey through the Cascading Falls. I was out now – I recognised this place – beyond the waters and the mind rape.

Vault of Forget, Level Two.

I'd survived the test of memory. Now came a much more substantial exam – against something that I had no desire to stop and consider. Something of remarkable strength, of unyielding fury – something standing unafraid before the ending of all these tired worlds.

"Can you hear me?" I said, not bothering to speak above a whisper. The creature ahead could hear me just fine. "You know the outcome of this fight – must I face it again?"

There was no answer – save a small, tittering laugh in the back of my mind. And that was answer enough.

"Bring him on then, bitch, and then you and I are going to have our reckoning."

"What a terrible thing to say to someone who has done so much for you, Harry."

I cast my gaze across the dusty stone coliseum and beheld... myself... standing at the heart of the arena. A pale, bloody, twisted version of myself. Harry Potter, standing alone, looking a little worse for wear. I advanced, wand in hand, toward my double. He moved left, I moved right – we circled each other – broken and battered reflections of all that we could ever become.

"You're a handsome son of a bitch, I'll give you that," I said.

"Lady Time demands trial by fire, Harry – and who better to face than your darker impulses, than all you have become across the long years?" My twin laughed, his thick black locks hung lank against his pale, white forehead. "All that you may yet become, given the nature of this, the final time, for Harry Potter, Time Warrior."

"I never accepted that title, Evil Harry." I licked my lips, waiting for myself to move. "Meaningless words from beings who stand outside the ebb and flow of True Time – who meander between nothingness and non-existence, searching for mortal playthings. The Powerless Gods of Forget!"

The last I snarled and the entire realm shook beneath my shoes. Thunder crashed and marble archways toppled into the empty seating. In the distance, I could hear vain screams – of outrage, of grief, of all Time had left to offer.

"Let me pass," I told my double. "She – It – has some explaining to do."

"All your lives have been building toward this moment, Harry. This final roll of the dice. The choices you make are made for good this time. Choose how you proceed very carefully."

Six distinct podiums were arrayed around the outer ring of the arena, about seven feet high. They were of ruined and cracked marble, like the rest of this façade, yet it was the items upon them that drew attention. A broomstick, a scroll of parchment, a ruby-encrusted silver sword, a glowing orb of prophecy, a cloak of invisibility... and a tiny golden snitch.

"Six," I said. "Six when there is usually seven... Where is your seventh Horcrux, buddy?"

My evil-twin tapped his evil-forehead with the tip of his evil-wand, smirked, and pointed toward my infamous scar. "You can't ignore it this life – it counts for all. The last Horcrux is hidden away inside, in the very remnants of the past that you call a soul, Harry. No matter how clever you are, you still have to die to take Voldemort with you."

"Die and stay dead," I agreed. "If it can be done leaving the world relatively whole then I welcome death... with the wide open arms of the very weary."

Evil Harry inclined his head. "Rest is coming," he said, almost kindly, but then that smirk returned. "Or not – perhaps you'll just be ground

to dust upon the gears of the Infernal Clock, if and when you fail... Not a happy ending in sight, hmm?"

"No such thing, boss." I raised my wand. "You want it in the head or the chest, my good man?"

"I'm you, Harry – a much more badass and pale version of you, to be sure – but still essential all that you are. Where do you want it?"

Good question. One to be answered with fire.

I cut a swath of air apart with my wand, turning against my guard, and a trail of purple fire burned through the air after me. The magic flowed faster than thought, than true desire and impulse. Stallions of viscous flame burst forth from my wand and screamed against the thunder!

Evil Harry was just as quick, and not averse to dark magic – neither was I, but there were lines – and I ducked beneath a jet of black fetid light, scorching the air with malice and the stone with hoarfrost.

My fiendfyre always had a mind of its own, wresting my will for control, yet I was a master craftsman in this regard. I turned the purple beasts – wild horses – upon myself and the six raised Horcruxes across the breadth of the coliseum. The fire raged and split, encircling the dome as I dived under spellwork from my evil twin. He was laughing, enjoying the fight, as I sent my chaotic flame to devour the ragged pieces of his soul.

Once it was underway, handling the fyre was second nature. I ignored it almost entirely, shoved it to the back of my turbulent mind, yet maintained a tight leash of control over the near-sentient flame. I turned my attention upon myself, parrying the truly awful light he sent my way. Spells designed to sicken and rot, to fester and destroy...

I was an inventive, resilient bastard – I had to give myself that much.

"What's that in your jacket pocket, Harry?" Evil Harry asked. He danced around the fyre I sent his way – danced through it – blistering his pale skin and ignoring the burns. "You think your mind so well protected – NOT FROM ME! HAHAAH!"

The item in my pocket had been burning a hole there since I had removed it from the trunks back in Atlantis, just after Fleur and I had spent the night together. "Oh that's nothing, pal. Just part of this crazy scheme I've got planned. Should be good – there'll be cake afterwards. Forswhex!"

Spirals of clear blue light, almost water, formed a swirling shield around me, defending me from the heat and cold of the varying magical energies crossing the arena. My fiendfyre was doing its job, spinning in thick vast columns around the perimeter, eating the Horcruxes. Great violent screams competed with the thunder for dominance as the soul vessels were devoured one after the other.

"You're better than this," I told myself. "Quit holding back."

"As you wish."

Evil Harry leapt – and I leapt with him – our wands and minds carving magic beneath us and all around in complex waves. We shot into the air, above the flame and through the flame, caught on currents of invisible weight and magic – we flew around the coliseum and traded blows of such strength –lighting the world with conflicting shades of raw potential.

We were barely warming up. I commanded the loose fyre to rise and chase my counterpart while deflecting a column of unleashed Demon's Light. The black flame, as slick as oil, had been unleashed without constraint. It targeted both of us with equal intent – only ever to destroy – and added an element of vicious surprise to the whole affair.

"I don't remember you being this good!" I called through the maelstrom. "Usually you've fucked up by now!"

"I learnt from the best. Or the worst, given your track record. How many times has it been now? Do you even know? How often has the Clock ticked back to zero?"

I didn't know. Memories of failed lives flickered across the wastelands in my head. Too many to count, too many to remember... and there were more, more and more and more and more and more and more—

ARRRGGGHHHH!

—and there was something else, as well, within the wastelands. Wavering memory of being so strong, so very powerful. Of bringing entire cities crashing down around me. Of freezing or razing entire oceans. Of magic so well utilised, so understood – a war. The Final War. Played out again and again... How could I not have remembered this?

The War...

"...of Time," my double said, ducking and diving under the various magical flame until he hovered before me on invisible currents of air. "The War of Time. All the power that's to come, Harry, all the magical how-to's and know-how's, you remember the cost of truly letting go?"

"Yes," I said. But sweet merciful Batman, I wish I didn't. It was awful – all-consuming. The things we had done, Voldemort and I, the things we would do all over again in brand new ways. Same shit different day, boss, you can't change the fuckin' weather. "You would have done the same."

"I was born in what you did, Time Warrior." Evil Harry laughed. "I only exist because you failed, and fairly soon you will kill me, I will return to nothing, and you'll roll the dice once more – thinking you're playing for the first time – but all your moves have been found wanting already, time and time again. End this, would you, let the universe wither and die as it will..."

My fyre was circling us both, kept in check by my thoughts alone. My twin was trapped, encircled – already dead, as he had said – just a few parting words. His Horcruxes were all smoke in the wind. Thunder crashed overhead, lightning struck the marble stonework, hailstones the size of golf balls were devoured by the heat... and it

was all special effects bullshit – an external representation of the storm within my own mind.

"The War of Time." A slow, careful grin spread across my face. "It will be different this time. It's already different."

Evil Harry sighed and offered a sad smile, pitying or worse... "You say that every time, you know."

"I probably do, but then this time counts for all, buddy. Now burn and die."

My double, a construct of magical energy lost here alone in the heart of Forget, laughed as the purple fyre – and his own Demon's Light – crested the outer wave of protection around us and consumed him alive.

A few sparks, a sizzling regret, a wisp of grey smoke.

Fin.

Together we cry...

The landscape rose and fell on the whim of some unimaginable tide of raw magic. Entire valleys were thrust screaming into the sky, gently and calmly, while great craggy mountain peaks sunk below the earth. The noise was that of a breeze through the trees at twilight, struck with the taste of possibility.

I walked through the immense shifting of the ground and sky, of all that was, twirling my wand between the two good fingers that remained on my left hand. The realm of Forget, a magical never-place, was in turbulence all around me... as I approached its core, from which all manner of relativity had sprung forth and poisoned the universe – a short while ago, all things considered from a viewpoint of that very same relativity.

After a time, I found myself in a dark and gloomy wood (I found myself within a shadowed forest, for I had lost the path that does not stray...) not ready just yet to abandon all hope.

I had been in this forest before – a long time ago – and yet I felt like I had never been away. I'd sold something precious here, been screwed over, and gained a glimpse of infinite immortality. It had driven me quite mad.

The forest canopy was dense, but through the murky gaps I could glimpse the occasional star. There were no sounds save the rustling of dead leaves at my feet, yet the silence itself was thunderous.

I came to a crossroads bathed in moonlight, a path split right down the middle veering away far to the left and even further to the right.

Lord Voldemort stood at the fork in the road; his hood lowered and pale head gazing up at the sky. He heard or sensed my approach, for without turning around he said, "An interesting creation, this world, wouldn't you agree, Harry?"

I shrugged. "Not much special about this place. Watch out for the saucy water nymphs – I once got well and truly fucked by one somewhere around here."

There were no scuffmarks on the Dark Lord's robes – unlike my suit – he had clearly not been fighting wild evil copies of himself, or swimming through centuries of bleeding memory. I had a sneaking suspicion he had just simply strolled through the Cascading Falls of Reality – and why not? He was more magic than man, after all. Terrible, awful magic... but magic just the same.

"Which is the correct path?"

I smirked. "Why, Voldemort, there is only one path." And sure enough there was. The fork in the road had melted into one straight-cut swath through the forest. A soft, gentle rain of silver sparks were whipped up by the wind and danced along our trail. "It was just waiting for me to catch up."

"What was waiting?"

No sense in lying. "What we came for," I said. "Lady Time, the secret knowledge of Atlantis – what made that civilisation more advanced than anything that will ever be seen on our earth again – and our way out of this place and back to the real world."

In dread silence, Voldemort took to the path and I followed, neither anxious nor eager to get where we were going. I kept a careful eye over my shoulder, looking out for Chronos or Saturnia – the Orc-Mare had served as a warning, if nothing else, that I was not alone here. Surrounded on all sides by enemies of varying immortality.

"We're heading into unintended nightmares now," I said to my companion. "Pathways of magic not seen for ten thousand years."

Voldemort held his silence for a time, the forest shifting around us – violent blues, washed greens, and tiny floating sparks of magic – and when he spoke, he sounded almost human. Almost.

"I am reminded of the forests of Albania," he said. "Where I spent over a decade in exile because of your mother's love for you, Harry. This forest... the flow of magic all around us. It is more and less than Albania."

"The illusion is better than reality, yet it is still an illusion." I rubbed the back of my neck, mindful of the deep cut and the dried blood. "You should have died and stayed dead, Voldemort. A lot more people would be alive and happy today."

The Dark Lord laughed. "The wrong people, Harry. You are too young, too simplistic in your view of right and wrong, to understand my vision – to understand what needs to be done."

"Genocide." I grinned. "Purification of the Wizarding World, a purge of the Muggles... and for what? So you can wear the pureblood crown, ruler of nothing but fear-blinded fools?" I understood all too well – better than anyone, even Voldemort himself. "Someone will always rise up to stop you. If not me, if not Dumbledore, then someone."

"And I will destroy them as I will destroy you, once we return to our proper realm."

"I don't want to die," I said, and there was some small grain of truth there. I wanted to grow old, truly old, with Fleur, and live a life free of epic consequence. It was never to be – of this I could be certain – but a hundred years or so of relatively normal life wouldn't seem that long, not after everything, and there could be happiness there. Not always, but then that's life.

"It is not a matter of 'wanting' anything, Harry. You were born a symbol – you are scarred by my downfall thirteen years ago – and the masses look to you as a 'Chosen One' to stand against me. There has to be an accounting between us, for past wrongs, for the greater good. You may not wish to die, but you have to."

"We'll see."

We always did.

(Her name was Tessa – I don't need saving, 'Arry – maybe yes maybe no)

The forest grew more oppressive and dense all around us, and Voldemort took to clearing a path with his wand, hacking through great swaths of constricting foliage with clean bursts of razor-sharp magic. It was still quiet, still cool and desperate beneath the eaves of the trees, but the end was in sight now.

Indeed, we were there.

The path widened into a glade devoid of all trees. A slab of white stone, a hundred feet across and wide, under a starlit sky filled with strange and rather unholy constellations, filled the clearing. In the centre of the glade was a doorway, suspended on nothing, of old oaken wood, marked with a single solitary rose. Before the doorway stood a man – a man who looked millennia older than Dumbledore.

Older than anything, really, and he didn't even exist.

Voldemort strode purposely forward, wand held aloft, and I moved off to the side.

The old man rested his weight against a heavy staff of petrified wood. His sweeping grey robes and long tangled beard, the canyons of wrinkles marring his face and spotted scalp, made him appear a statue – or a corpse. His eyes were lifeless, tinged yellow with cataracts, and ancient.

As Voldemort approached, perhaps sensing all that he had come for hidden just beyond the door behind the old man, he cast a wave of strength from his wand to batter the archaic sentinel aside.

For the first time, the old man moved – and he did so almost faster than the human eye could follow. Voldemort's blade of force clashed harmlessly against his staff and an arc of electric-blue light burst forth against the Dark Lord.

The band of lightning struck Voldemort high in his chest and blasted a hole the size of a quaffle straight through his torso.

A cloud of red mist, organs and ragged skin exploded out of the back of his robes and he collapsed, a bloody pulp, against the clear white stone.

Nothing less will save the day...

"You brought that creature with you again," Lady—or Father Time, I guess, given the beard—said, gesturing to the broken Dark Lord. "His presence is a defilement of all that is protected here, Harry Potter."

"I know. Believe me, I know. But we are linked, the devil and I, and the only way to stop him from gaining all this power is to let him have it. I can't stop him without it, and if I hadn't opened the way he would've done it himself, eventually."

The old man, Father Time, regarded me – he looked as weary as I felt. Both of us ancient, both of us so very tired. He had a few aeons on me, but at that age the passing of millennia must seem like no more than the blink of an eye. We were of a kind, Time and I, distraught between the thin, cruel line of mortal immortality.

"I will not stop what you have planned," Father Time said.

I paused, eyeing the dark tentacles of magic criss-crossing the Dark Lord's chest. He was patching himself up already. Even if I could without killing myself, attacking him now wouldn't do a damn thing... it was tempting though, oh so tempting.

"You should stop me," I said. The flesh was knitting itself back together. Voldemort drew a haggard breath and sat up, eyes ablaze. "But you can't stop me, can you?"

"No." Time sighed. "He waits for you beyond the door – intent on your destruction. You'll have to forgive him that, Harry."

Dark magics protected Voldemort, and as he rose a cloud of malice seemed to surround him – an aura of seething hate, of raw chaos. Here was the destroyer of worlds, bound in terrible prophecy. He beheld the door behind the old man with unbroken determination. It hung suspended on nothing, and yet led to all that mattered. All that did not exist.

Father Time stepped aside as the Dark Lord advanced toward him, almost bowing in his wake, destined to seek the power of Atlantis.

Voldemort, healed and unharmed, strode through the door into unknown dusks, leaving me alone with the physical manifestation of the true power fuelling this nightmare.

Nay.

Fuelling the entire world as any of us could ever know it, between one lonely moment and the next...

"So this is it... the end."

"No," I said. "No, no, no. This is just an end. The best is yet to come."

"Chronos," I asked, "who is he?"

Father Time shook his head. "The truth of that is obscured to even one such as I."

"He's not a god," I said. "There is no such thing."

A deep throated laugh – arrogant yet lazy – rumbled from the old man. "So old and yet so blind, Harry... perhaps the same can be said of the both of us."

"Why is this the last time?" I asked. "Already so many pieces are aligned against me. I... I don't think I'm ready to win. I need my immortality back."

"You were never immortal, Harry – not in the true sense of the word. You are, and have always been, more than immortal." He paused. "A hero for the ages, a figurehead of the Last-Time War. It is the one you call Chronos that has denied you the paths through my murky waters. He hates you, Harry. More than anything."

"What is he!" I asked, exasperated. My mouth was dry, I could taste blood, and the forest stank of copper – of raw magic. My head was killing me. I wanted the headache to end... I wanted, needed, it all to end.

"I do not know, but the truth will break you."

"I cannot be broken."

"You are the Time Warrior, Harry Potter – the last High Lord and King of Atlantis." Father Time regarded me with remarkable indifference. All of these powerful beings of eternal life, existing outside the universe, were always so emotionally dead. "Broken or not, your future is grim."

"I intend to raze Atlantis to the ground and destroy the very foundations of the faux-reality it still desperately clings to," I said, running slow circles around a nick in the length of my wand. "I'm the king of nothing."

"This I know. Crowned in impossible regret." If Time could have personification, why a wise old man with a wise old beard? Wouldn't a kid with a pack of matches be more apt? "Guard your memories, Harry Potter, for they make you dangerous."

"This I know."

"Not well enough. You reject lordship of ancient lands, you deny death and intend terrible travesties upon the Infernal Clock, yet all of that pales in comparison to the storm in your mind." And now this creature did look emotional – it looked afraid, behind that guise of an old man, it looked frail and fuckin' terrified. "Should you... When you remember all that you have forgotten, no force in this or any other world will be able to tear you down."

"I never remember everything – it doesn't work that way." Didn't it? "I've lived and died too many times."

Father Time looked through me, his gaze piercing futures past and present – of days to come and long ago. A unique perspective bound in an ironic prison of slaughtered free will. "Lord Potter... no... King Potter? No, no." It laughed – high and loud – insane and worse than insane. Two peas in a pod, Time and I. "No gods, he says!"

"Say what's on your mind, friend." I had a brief urge to rend the old man limb from limb.

"When your memories awaken, when the storm is unleashed... Woe be to anyone who stands in the path of Harry Potter..." No laughter now. Just a solemn nightmare-silence. "...The Sleeping God."

Oh.

Oh shit.

A/N: There we have it. Some important revelations in this chappie. What did you think? Let me know in a review. Next chapter: Chapter 26 – The Wastelands of Time is already underway. Big things happening, and then three or four more chapters to close this story out...

Bring on the end, eh?

All the best,

Joe

Chapter 26 – The Wastelands of Time

There was once a creature that crawled on the sky
With very sharp teeth that caused people to die
Made only of bone and an instinct to kill
It wound over oceans and stalked over hills
Any village that found this thing at its door
Very quickly became a village no more
One day, expecting the sunrise in the east
A child, instead, saw this shadowy beast
He thought to himself, 'I don't have much time,
If I don't act quickly it's the end of the line'
'I can't save my village, I'm not yet a man
But I know of someone... something who still can'
So he ran to the wastelands outside of town
And he stood on a cliff and shouted aloud:
'I've always been told not to come to this place
And to run if I ever caught sight of your face'
'But I think you now might be my town's only hope
So show yourself,' he squeaked through the lump in his throat
It seemed for a moment that the whole world stood still

But then down his spine ran a horrific chill
Behind him: the one he both needed and feared
Silently, Skeleton Harvester had appeared
Those leathery wings, that spidery hand
The boy was so frightened he could barely stand
The creature from tales that had haunted his sleep
Was moving right toward him, ready to reap
Yet courage and self-preservation prevailed
The boy voiced his plan, his gambit unveiled
'I can see in your eyes that my bones aren't enough'
(though, for reasons quite clear, this was a bluff)
'My skeleton is plain and really quite small
While over there is the rarest skeleton of them all'
'That ivory creature is one of a kind
And if you fail to act now it will leave you behind'
'So don't waste time ending my body-bone unity
Go and claim that unique harvesting opportunity'
With fear in his heart and his breath, oh how bated
He gazed at Skeleton Harvester...
And he waited.

~Culung & Castro, Buttersafe (Part I)

Begin at the beginning – everything else is just the devil and his details – then, when you come to the end, stop.

The Sleeping God.

Damn it all.

There was a certain... morbid resignation to the title, I'd give it that much. But nothing more.

"Gods don't die as often as I do," I told Father Time. I would dismiss this latest label as I did all the others. I was just Harry Potter, functioning alcoholic. Anything else was bitter hearsay and rumour.

The old man shuffled forward, his oaken staff biting into the stone beneath his feet. Centuries of dust fell from his shabby robes as he moved. "Have you ever honestly died, Harry? You've been right to the edge, gazed over the precipice of that Abyss, but always your soul has been blasted back through time before death could claim it. Gods don't die, Harry. You don't die."

My eyes flicked past the old man to the doorway suspended on air behind him. I had to follow Voldemort, had to undo all that was about to be done. The weight in my ruined jacket pocket was fiercely hot and heavy. "Do they bleed, hmm? Because I've done an awful fucking lot of that!"

"Say you fail this time. Say you're sent back to the start – but the pain is too much, so much, that it kills you again... only to have the game reset, sending you back again, and again..." He chuckled. "No doubt you've considered the ramifications of such an existence. Painful, at the very least. But with strange aeons, Harry, who's to say the Clock won't spit you back out, alive and well, some distant future down the line? What then, hmm? Would you accept it then?"

"I don't have time for this." I felt a weird, almost foreign, stirring in my chest. I realised with a start that it was fear.

"You don't understand," Time said. "But you will. The gods of old were never born, they were forged – through time and through circumstance, they were forged from the remnants of the past. Once you remember all you have forgotten..." He reached into his robes and removed a tarnished little item. "This is for you."

I accepted Time's gift with a certain weary detachment. It was a simple dull gold watch, heavy and round, numbers in black against a white face. An hour, minute, and second hand – it was currently half-past four and... thirteen seconds.

"I don't need a watch to tell the time," I said. "It constantly burns in my head. Every. Damn. Second."

"When this watch strikes four minutes to twelve – midnight in the minds of insanity, Harry – you will have failed for the last time and be lost to an eternity of near-death upon the grinding gears of the Infernal Clock. This I foresee."

"You... foresee that, do you?" I shook my head. "Even Time can't know the future with any certainty." The second hand wasn't moving, wasn't counting the seconds. "I think this is broken anyway, buddy. According to your math I've got seven and a half hours before I die."

Father Time laughed – a horrible, wheezing sound. His breath stank of old parchment, of moss-covered stones. "The watch does not measure time, Harry, it measures harm. You must make a final move against your enemies before four to midnight, or be doomed to a never-death of mindless agony – alone and eternal."

I slipped the watch into a spare pocket. I thought I could already hear it ticking away like a time bomb. Another uncomfortable weight to drag me down into the dirt. Do your worst, I thought, cursing Time, the universe, and everything. Just do your fucking worst. I won't break.

Don't break.

Can't break.

Shan't break.

"Could'a, would'a, should'a." I sighed. "Step aside, old man, time's up."

"You won't be able to undo what you have planned, Harry." A crooked grin below bloodshot and yellow eyes. "Just Harry."

I returned his crazy bug-eyed stare with one of my own. "That's why I'm doing it, Ace."

In the end, that's why I did anything.

The definition of insanity... is repeating the same action and expecting a different outcome.

Ah shit.

"Time to try something new then."

Stepping through a doorway suspended on nothing but air feels about as strange as stepping through a doorway suspended in a wall leading into the kitchen. Considering my destination, the Heart of Time itself, there was very little fanfare or much to-do.

One moment I was in the forest, a fading old man dying a slow death behind me, the next I was standing atop a wide and broken plateau, gazing up at a sky strewn with heavy dark clouds, bruised purple and worse, speeding across the atmosphere as fast as spell fire.

I could smell sulphur on the air. The dark stone beneath my feet was cracking – arcs of red light glittering through the darkness. All of the cracks were splintering out from the centre of the plateau, where Voldemort stood gazing into the... abyss.

The world was empty around me – the doorway had disappeared, it only swung one way – and there was nothing but an ocean of dust surrounding this solitary island, which itself was just a spire of basalt rock thrust up out of the harsh landscape.

A curious place to find a white rose.

"But then a rose is a rose is a Rose," I whispered, and stepped forward toward Voldemort and his beautiful abyss, the end of the road, the white rose of moment – the Infernal Clock.

Here was the final prize – the reward for the last month of work since I awoke back in Privet Drive. All that I had done, all that I ever did, was to gain this moment under the burnt sky, amidst the dust and the sulphur and the dew-speckled petals of Time.

Memories came to me now, more and more. I saw myself here so many times. I saw Voldemort... always the two of us, always the rose. Always the understanding. The knowledge, the know-how of the universe, being thrust through our minds. Or the understanding that it was always there, locked away, inside everyone, waiting for the right key.

It was like a song, really, a terrible song of forget, caught in the back of my mind. I could feel the Clock ticking inside my mind, and I knew Voldemort felt the same. It ticked away, second between second, and I understood what it was saying, singing, screaming.

"Can you hear it, Harry?" Voldemort asked, his voice barely a whisper as I drew level with him. "It speaks many secrets, secrets of such... power."

"I hear it." My head was pounding. Memories were being unleashed in fierce torrents. So much memory, so many wasted years. And yet I would never remember it all, I would never awake the supposed-god within. Fuck you, Father Time. "This is True Atlantis, the Lost City, the Font of All Magic."

Voldemort seemed almost humbled. But he was merely absorbing the song from the rose. "Avenues of magic, pathways to immortality... it

is all here, all within reach. I can see it, hear it." He laughed. "Dumbledore does not stand a chance!"

"Hey," I said. "You still got me to contend with. I hear the same thing, buddy. I remember how to do magic of such magnificence that the world will crumble before we're through. You and I, not Dumbledore, are the true enemies in this war. Don't ever forget that."

"I should kill you now, but not before you tell me how to return—" Voldemort cut himself off, his crimson eyes lost and distant for a moment. "Oh, I see now... Of course. The portal can be inverted, twisted, even bypassed entirely. The magic is so simple, and yet, beyond that of any wizard alive save Lord Voldemort!" The Dark Lord met my eyes. "Your assistance, Harry, is no longer required."

To that I could only shrug. The magic was already at work within us – as fast as thought. Voldemort knew how to Apparate, for use of a better term, back to Atlantis, and then back to the real world, because it was all there, in the understanding of the rose. That was what the Infernal Clock did.

What it always did.

Unlocked the knowledge, ended the confusion... it had to be stopped, and I was the one to do it. All at once I felt a certain undeniable stirring of righteous fury, of anger unmatched. This time would count for all.

I fell out of my thoughts and found myself staring down the twisted length of Voldemort's wand, the tip almost touching my nose. "Farewell, Harry Potter."

"I don't end," I said. My wand was tucked away in my pocket – alongside my new watch and the item I'd brought all the way from Atlantis. "And I guess I don't die, but you can't kill me, Tom, not until you've heard the full prophecy."

"Avada Kedavra!"

Ah goddamn it!

Gambled and lost gambled and lost gambled and lo—

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

I had gambled and lost.

That's all I had time to think before sick, terrible emerald light filled my vision and the cold, numb tendrils of death reached for me through the screeching void of ignorant mortality.

Only I was still breathing.

The light was very green – very dark – and all that I could see. It absorbed the spectrum of my vision.

I blinked. All still green. A slow frown creased my brow and I took a careful step back... away from all that was green and death.

The Dark Lord came back into view, eyes wide and shocked at what was occurring between us. The Killing Curse, that all-too-familiar green light of death, hung suspended in the air, a sphere of rippling emerald energy, hovering inches from my face and inches from the tip of Voldemort's wand.

It had stopped dead in the air, scant milliseconds before blasting me into an eternal agony of chaotic, universe-ending time travel.

"Wow," I said. "Okay. Born to run..."

I took another careful step back. And then, just to be safe, a careful step to the side – out of the intended path of the curse – and very calmly removed my wand from my pocket.

I glanced at Voldemort. "Now let's look at this as a potential learning experience—"

"Avada Kedavra!"

I leapt before the words were out of the snake-faced bastard's mouth. I leapt high into the air, flying once again, on invisible cords of magic and strength that came to me as fast as thought. Over the Dark Lord, over the Infernal Clock, and landed on the far side of the plateau – opposite a punk kid in a suit as fine as mine had been, once upon a time.

"Hiya, Harry."

"Hey, Chronos," I said, not missing a beat. "Didn't think you'd show up to this party."

"Please stop what you're doing," he said. "What you're about to do."

"Not a chance. I think it's what you wanted me to do anyway, all those weeks ago when we first met."

"We've known each other a lot longer than that..." He winked. "Do your worst then."

"POTTER!"

I turned to face Voldemort across the expanse of the plateau. The Infernal Clock grew between us on a bed of twisted ivy, glittering in the half-light. Its song was still drumming a beat through my mind. I felt clear – fresh. The headache was still there, still agonising, but in a strangely bearable way. I never lost it completely, it just didn't happen.

There was a second orb of death, a writhing emerald curse, hovering in the air where I had been standing only moments ago. I was a little flummoxed by that. Why were the curses all... caught? No time – never any time – and all the time in existence beating away within the buds of a white rose only a few feet away.

"Lord Voldemort, allow me to introduce Chronos. He's some sort of immortal time-god. Those Orc-Mare that tried to kill me earlier on – they're his lapdogs."

"There is ancient magic at work here," the Dark Lord said, regarding his hovering curse-orbs with evident distaste. He kept his wand trained on the pair of us. "Is this your doing, Harry?"

"We've just had the entire collective knowledge of the Atlantean Empire embedded in our minds, Voldemort, you figure it out."

"I will destroy you both—"

"WHY?" I roared. I was always angry – always – but now the anger felt just, divine, righteous... "You desire dominion over a world of inbred, arrogant pricks! You want the Muggles destroyed – a world only for the 'worthy'. You're a misguided fool, Voldemort. If you'd just stop and look, fuckin' look, you'd see the world for what it is – terrifying!" I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Desperately terrifying and so, so amazingly wonderful. Why would you ever want to tear that down?"

"Because he can," Chronos whispered. "There's no time left, Harry. Those arrogant curses hovering across the way are testament enough to that."

"What are they?"

"They are horrific intent caught in rips of Time. Already the effects of what you are about to do are altering reality, yes, yes."

"But I haven't done it yet."

"Exactly! You haven't, but clearly you will... and we're all damned for it."

I tried to think it all out, to get it all straight and a-okayed in my head. But it was mindboggling. The curses were magic, true, caught in... time rips... that were the result of what I was about to do to the Infernal Clock. I guess there was some sense to that, time being a relative concept and all, but it seemed lacking.

Voldemort had turned to the edge of the plateau and was gazing down across the ashen wastelands that stretched to the far horizons.

Great clouds of ash rose on distant winds, screaming into the silence under the azure sky. I knew what he was doing... what he was sensing. I could sense it to, hidden just beneath the surface.

I guess it was time for the end game.

The Dark Lord raised his wand and the tip shone with crimson radiance.

About a hundred million lengths of shiny white bone burst forth from beneath the ocean of ash surrounding our desolate plateau. About a hundred million arcs of yellow lightning coursed between the bones, fusing them together, giving them form, affording a dead army awful shape, and sealing another lock on this twisted fate we all shared.

The Dark Lord raised his wand... unleashed his army... and I let him.

"The Shambling Bone-Men," Chronos said, running a hand back through his hair. He chuckled. "This is what Atlantis awoke ten millennia ago. This is what ground that civilisation into dust."

"Yes," I said. Weary resignation didn't seem to cover the depths of hopeless fatigue in my voice. "The Atlanteans dared to come as far as we have and awoke a force buried in the heart of Time itself. The armies of Forget, nothing but dust in the wind, and yet Atlantis was overrun in a war that lasted centuries..."

"What hope does your world have then?" Chronos asked. "If Atlantis could not defeat this scourge, if all that power and might was annihilated in an endless war, then what hope for your world, Harry?"

I smiled. "There's me." Hope enough for anyone, maybe yes and maybe no. "Guess you don't know everything, Chronos. I've sent this army howling back into the abyss more than once. Where Atlantis failed I succeeded. I told you right back at the beginning, all those weeks ago, that the only way to stop Voldemort from seizing the power of Atlantis and unleashing a demonic horde upon the world, is to let him seize the power of Atlantis and unleash a demonic horde upon the world." I laughed.

The Dark Lord was laughing into the sky across the expanse of our dread-plateau. His new army of demonic hellspawn was busy assembling itself from the filth of a fallen world and all was strangely, eerily rushed – as if Time itself had some place to be.

And the army of bone... the Bone-Men... well...

From the dark fires of what may as well be called Hell emerged endless white and silver bone, ancient joints spinning and cracking like the tumbling of a million dice and dead-eyes spinning in the dull yellow flame of the inferno. The Bone-Men rose to its full height and pierced the false quiet of the twilight with that screech of elsewhere and long ago.

After a moment, in which that yellow lightning tore apart the sky and in which I barely noticed, Voldemort turned to face me.

"Prophecy or not, Harry, the world is mine. Follow me home if you dare." He inclined his head and then, in utter silence, the Dark Lord turned and disappeared – taking his shambling army with him as if they were nothing more, nothing less, than mere dust on the wind.

"God he's an arrogant prick," I muttered. The thousands upon tens of thousands of creatures faded away – gone but not forgotten. "Wouldn't you say?"

Chronos shrugged, brushing a few flecks of ash from his lapel. "Perhaps the same could be said of all of us, Harry, yes, yes."

"Perhaps it could." That item burning a hole in my pocket demanded to be drawn. I reached for it and Chronos grasped my arm.

"Everything that happens from here or on out will be different from what you know."

I nodded. "How many lives did I waste trying to figure that out, I wonder... do you know?"

"More than a dozen, less than a thousand. Fate... will not be pleased, yes, yes."

I shrugged out of Chronos' grip and removed the shrunken item from my pocket, switching my wand for it. The metal was cool in my hand, biting. I whispered a word and a long, vicious blade of dark metal burst up and out of my palm, growing within my clenched fist.

A sword.

The blade bulged at the top, at the north point, and two longer points aiming east and west from the tip reached out, infinitely sharp, almost making the weapon a double-bladed axe. It looked like the hand of a clock – the long minute hand.

"Time," Chronos said. "Oh, Harry James Potter, time." He reached forward and ran his pale finger up the length of the blade in my hand. "Who better to wield time itself, a weapon that can hack through the armies of the void, of Hell, than a Time Warrior – his very sword a symbol of all that passes around him."

"It's my time now," I whispered.

I levelled my sword against the golden-green stem of the Infernal Clock. A long, harrowing cry for mercy echoed throughout my skull. I heeded it not at all...

...and severed the spine of all that ever was, and all that ever could be – borne upon those blasted, those awful, those dum-de-de-dum-dum... Wastelands of Time.

"Bravo, Harry James Potter, bravo!"

The universe screamed as I cut it in half.

But then the universe would. Complainin' sumabitch that it is.

It was a scream heard in dreams, on the edge of the wind, and across the Wastelands. A near-silent scream of mercy unheeded, of regret turned into Forget. The radiance of the petals in the rose seemed to die as my sword passed through the fragile, eternal stem.

I caught the rose before it fell to the barren ground. The thorns cut my fingers, my palm. It stung like a motherfucker, but considering the crime against humanity I'd just committed, the pain was bearable.

The earth began to shake. Torrents of liquid flame burst forth through the dust across the harsh horizon. The two hovering orbs of emerald death shot forth and criss-crossed over my head, missing me by the skin of my teeth. The rose was heavier than it should have been – worlds heavier, can ya dig it – and it was shaking in my grasp.

"What time is it?" I asked. The clock in my head was doing everything and nothing. It was half past the end of the world. I dug around in my pocket for my new watch – the gift from Time itself, which I now literally held in my hands. The hour hand had slipped two hours closer to midnight. "Time is in flux, Chronos!"

I laughed at the sky as it began to burn.

Chronos sighed and reached down to pat me on the shoulder. "It must be very lonely inside that head of yours."

"Harry Potter..." Chronos exhaled with all the weight of eternity bearing down upon his shoulders. "Harry James Potter. The last King of Atlantis. Do you have any idea what you have done? Any idea at all? Because of you, all bets are off. Darkness – Raw Hell – will descend upon the world in a wave of terrible nightmare intent on devouring all humanity."

"Oops." I had a think about that. "Wait, hang on, that's just business as usual. Fuck you, Chronos. You know it wouldn't hurt to smile once in awhile."

"I only remember how to smile in my dreams..."

I stroked my chin. "That was morbid. Come on, let's get back to Atlantis and burn it to the ground. Chaotic enough for ya, pal?"

Chronos smiled.

Let it begin...

From here on out, things were going to move fast.

Very fast.

I had five hours to save the world, according to the Clock of Doom, and if that wasn't enough, no amount of time would be. Five hours to save the world. Not stop Voldemort, that'd take more than mere finite minutes, but enough to stop his demon horde descending upon the world above London?

Yeah, plenty of time.

I'd done it in less.

From the plateau upon which I had murdered Time, Chronos and I stepped sideways through reality – we Apparated – across the length and breadth of Forget and back to Atlantis.

The way to do it was ridiculously simple, and I was amazed and disgusted that I had to make it this far every life to remember it. The Infernal Clock was tearing all the flesh it could from my hand, but at the same time it was still singing through my mind. More memories came to me now... more lives gone by.

I didn't know what I was going to do with this thing. It was growing increasingly hot and persistent. Cutting it in half had seemed like a pretty sweet move at the time, now I wasn't so sure...

So the world melted and I spun through nothing with Chronos at my side. We reappeared on a familiar dry dock looking out over the barren dustbowl of an ocean that was the coastline of Atlantis. I had brought us back to the Shipyards, to my battleship. As close as I could get without setting off the numerous wards and protective spells surrounding the old Atlantean cruiser.

Which didn't look so old anymore...

It looked shiny and new.

Like someone had put a few months work into it.

"So when and how are you going to try and kill me?" I asked Chronos, setting off along the old rusted walkway toward my ship.

Chronos eyed the rose in my hand, still sparkling and shaking, eating away at chunks of my skin. "I wouldn't dare touch you so long as you hold that, Harry James Potter."

I snorted. "You sound afraid."

"Of the damage you could do, oh yes, yes." He paused. "You have changed... everything."

All seemed quiet up on the battleship. There was no sign of Fleur, of Tonks, of Jason or Grace. How long had I been gone, I wondered... a few hours in Forget would be the equivalent of...

I marched through my wards, allowing Chronos to do the same. I had a strange feeling he was on my side, and had been for a very long time, and up the gangway onto the polished decking of the ship.

"Hey!" I called. "I'm home. Me, Chronos and the white rose of all creation!"

Jason and Tonks burst out from under the deck first, one after the other. Tonks brandished her wand and Jason a familiar mythrill axe – the very same I had chopped and slashed with not so long ago on this deck.

"You're back!" Jason exclaimed.

"Harry..." A grin blazed across Tonks' face. "At last!"

"Guess I owe you a Coke," Jason said, nudging Tonks in the ribs. "I was sure some monster or another had eaten you, kid."

I winked. The Infernal Clock spun in my hand, biting through more of my flesh. It was burning me now, as well. Blood ran in rivulets down

my arm, across my fingers, and splashed along the deck. "I like what you've done with the place."

"Harry," Tonks said. "Where have you been for so long? Who is this?"

"I've only been gone an hour or two," I said, with a somewhat sad, weary grin. Time was a relative concept, linear for all that matters, but oh so open to manipulation and... I looked at the writhing rose in my hand... mutilation.

"Three months," Fleur Delacour said, emerging from below deck with her arms wrapped protectively across her middle. She looked beautiful, and torn between desperate relief and anger. "Three months, 'Arry Potter."

Like I said, mutilation. I'd been gone only a few hours in my mind, a few hours since Fleur and I had slept together down below in her quarters. A few hours since that intimate, delicate, fucking awesome time... yet to Fleur it had been three months.

Damn, talk about not calling the next day.

"Hello, Fleur," I said. "I missed you."

"I forgot to miss you. You are bleeding, 'Arry," Fleur sighed. "Why am I always saying zat to you, hmm? 'Ave you brought me a rose?"

Grace emerged last, next to Fleur. Chronos looked between all four of my companions, all eyeing me in various states of relief and annoyance, and leant back against the ship's mast and laughed. "Here to save the whole wide world," he said. "And these are the days of our lives."

"Shut up," I said, stepping across the deck closer to my friends. "Is everything ready?"

"Everything except ze igniton," Fleur said. "Your instructions were to leave zat until you returned. Ze starlight may explode, you said. 'Arry... your hand needs attention."

"Let me," Tonks said. "We finally getting out of here, Harry? Back to England?"

I nodded. "Leave the rose, we don't have time and I haven't decided what to do with it yet. Have any of you been outside today?"

They all shook their heads. "Nothing out there but dust and regret," Grace said. "And monsters, of course. We've been on this damn ship pretty much since you disappeared."

The Infernal Clock was causing me so much pain that my hand was actually going numb. Time (heh) to deal with it. I'd brought it across realities, from one world to the next, and it was pissing and moaning about that. There were no outward effects that I had broken anything, though, which I suppose was for the best.

"Can you hear that?" I said, trying to open my fist around the rose. It wouldn't budge – the thorns were in deep. It was agony trying to release it.

"Hear what?" Jason Arnair asked, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "I don't hear anything..."

"Exactly." I gritted my teeth and managed to pull my thumb and index finger from the rose. Since the ring and little finger were missing entirely, that left the Infernal Clock dangling from the middle – my hand was all torn and bloody. "It's quiet, too quiet, even for Atlantis. We're about to come under attack."

"From You-Know-Who?" Tonks asked, tightening her grip around her wand.

"His shiny new army," I said, flicking my hand and loosing the last of the thorns. The Infernal Clock fell from my grasp. "Bone-Me—"

The white rose, stained red with my blood, hit the lower deck at our feet and exploded.

A noiseless, vicious explosion of blue crystal shards. The flower shattered, like glass, and shrapnel blasted outwards in a wide arc.

The blast knocked us all back – Tonks went spinning away over one of the old cannons, Jason was thrown back over Grace and cracked his head hard against the heavy oak mast.

There was no heat or flame – just a wave of concussive force and deadly projectiles of pure Time shooting through the air. I fell in a slow arc, slow and useless. Chronos was unaffected and I watched him dive in front of Fleur! But he was too slow, much too slow...

Three petals, three splinters of the Infernal Clock punched Fleur in the stomach, straight through her blouse. They were travelling fast enough to tear her open and blood, hot and fresh, blossomed across her middle.

A soundless scream was caught in my throat – for Fleur – as a thin splinter, a single petal, cut into my left shoulder, just below the bone and into the meat above my heart. It hurt. A lot. That scream emerged from my throat as raw agony.

I hit the deck hard, blinded with pain.

Fleur was screaming. Her tones piercing the pall of quiet regret aboard my ship amidst the ruins. I couldn't sit up, the pain was excruciating. I raised my head enough to see the crystal-blue shard of the Infernal Clock burrowing into my left shoulder, heading down toward my heart.

There was nothing I could do.

After a moment, I mastered the pain and managed to rise. I used my good hand to try and dig the shard out of my shoulder, but I could barely touch it without swaying. Blood flowed down my chest, through my shirt. The shard dug itself in deeper, as if it had a mind of its own. Unaware that I was still screaming, I left it and dragged myself over to where Fleur lay... bleeding far worse than I was.

"Merde," she said. Her eyes saw me, but there was something else there, something foreign. She was looking through me. "Eet iz so beautiful..."

"Fleur—"

"Move aside, Harry," Tonks said urgently. She had a nasty looking cut along her cheek but other than that appeared unharmed. She began waving her wand across Fleur's stomach. There was so much blood.

"Oh 'Arry..." Fleur whispered, her eyes distant and beautiful. "What 'ave you done...? So old, so ancient and lonely... you shouldn't 'ave done eet!" Her words descended into desperate, painful sobs.

"I-I don't understand," Tonks said. "I'm not coming up with anything." She tried her charms again, pale pink light flowing from her wand. "It's not working!"

Chronos stood over us all, seemingly unfazed and unharmed. He had tried to protect Fleur. I'd seen it. "They're coming," he said, as I met his gaze. "You don't have a choice here, Harry. Let me heal her while you deal with your Lord Voldemort and Forget."

"I can't trust you," I said. Tears were swimming in my eyes. I hadn't cried in centuries... "I'm barely back two minutes and I've already killed her. Her blood is on my hands... always on my hands." I blinked away the tears and looked down – at Tonks who was hopelessly casting charms over Fleur's wounds. There was no hope of removing the shards... not with simple Auror training.

Chronos smacked me – hard – right in my wounded shoulder. I felt the sharp, crystal petal dig in a little deeper. A spike of vicious cold aiming straight for my heart. What happened when it got there, I didn't know – or care. "I want her to live as much as you," the demigod said. He was so young, so young and so old – just like me.

"Trust him, Harry," Grace said. She was holding Jason's head in her lap, stroking his hair. He was unconscious, a nasty bruise swelling across his brow. "You have to trust in something."

I met her eyes, sapphire-blue and pretty. "Grace Connor... why did you come along?" A spent, mirthless chuckle escaped me. "We all know why, don't we. Very well."

Chronos had already knelt down next to Fleur. He picked her up in his arms effortlessly, as if she weighed less than a feather. Blood stained her blouse and jeans, and the decking beneath her. There was so much and it was so warm. Her brow was creased, pale... her platinum hair tangled and astray. She was so beautiful.

"I've nothing left to threaten you with," I told Chronos. He looked at me from beneath his sharp brow. We were heroes, I guess, and indistinguishable from madmen and villains. "So I'm just going to beg... please take care of her."

He nodded once and then turned on his heel. I watched him disappear down into the bowels of the ship with Fleur Delacour bleeding to death in his arms, and then I turned away, because the enemy was at the door, the world was about to come to a violent end, and I was the only one who could stop it.

Drum roll, if you please...

My wounds hurt. I limped up toward the bridge of the ship, sparing Jason and Grace a sad, tired glance. "Anything you can do to help," I said with a shrug, which sent bolts of pain lancing through my body, and tried to climb the steps. Why had the Clock exploded? Why had I brought it back at all?

Questions, questions – too many questions!

"Easy, Harry," Tonks said, offering me her strength. She ducked under my arm and kind of carried me up the steps. "So... you do know what you're doing, yes? Because I really want to go home now."

I offered her a comforting, friendly grin. At least it would've been comforting if not for the blood staining my teeth. My headache was killing me. "This is the easy part, Tonks, saving the world from the

horrors of Forgetful Atlantis. We'll be having beer and chips for dinner tonight, mark my words."

"...And Fleur?"

I sighed and Tonks helped me into the seat next to the control column. Hands on the steering wheel, so to speak. We gazed out over the docks and through the slipway doors, out at the barren, lifeless seabed beyond that disappeared over an azure horizon. "If she dies, it's my fault, if she lives... we learn something either way."

There was an empty bottle of Stella Artois on the control panel. I remembered Fleur and I sitting here and watching the sun-never-set. I brushed it aside. It had taken me a few days to repair this part of the ship, before I let myself be captured by Voldemort. It hadn't been switched on yet, but if memory served, and it did, this baby was about to show us some serious shit.

"Harry!" Grace screamed from the deck below.

I leaned over in my seat, straining my neck, just in time to see the far doors of the docks and most of the roof torn away under the force of a thousand demonic claws.

"Here we go!"

I started pushing buttons, keeping one hand on the wheel. Crystals and cool black stone panels began to glow with old Atlantean runes. A heavy, constant vibration ran throughout the ship and the deck beneath our feet. Tonks gripped the back of my leather chair hard, her face tense and afraid.

"Smile, sweetheart!"

The metal walkways buckled under the weight of a thousand tonnes of mythrill-enforced steel being torn asunder. These creatures were the only things in existence that could unmake mythrill. The noise was deafening, the reek of ancient bone near-maddening. Sulphur and dust and damp, dead earth all rolled into a cacophony of tormented screams.

Thousands of Bone-Men poured into the Shipyards, overrunning the broken and barren remains of the defeated Atlantean battle fleet. But there was one ship still ready to fly, one last battle to be fought. Wasn't there always?

The entire ship was shaking now. Sparks and heavy groans emanated from the control column. Yet it slowly began to rise, as if rolling waves had her across the bow... Yeehaw!... My ship would fly – that's about all she would do – but then that was enough.

The stone, metal, wood and mythrill that had gone into her design over ten-thousand years ago was polished as good as new, yet I could hear things tearing in the guts of the ship. There were groans and echoing creaks across the hull. Splinters of wood were snapping across the railings alongside the decking. But she held, she held firm.

The last flight, the first flight, in so many long millennia... as time moves in a line, that is. A reminiscence of times gone by, of long ago, of all the past mistakes bound into the fate of Voldemort and I... a reminiscence.

I laughed aloud, bleeding into my chair as my ward platforms collapsed and the howls of a thousand and more yellow eyes surged across the Shipyards for my head. It certainly fit – a good name.

The Reminiscence.

The Atlantean battleship Reminiscence rose on invisible winds. The starlight engines fuelled by the lifeblood of the heavens. There was a heavy cargo on board – gold, mythrill, ancient texts and weaponry – as well as my friends and allies. Sweet Fleur and gorgeous Tonks. We were headed for the end game now, up and out into the twilit sky!

Seconds before we were overrun I hit the big red glowing crystal in the centre of my control column and the Reminiscence was thrust forward. A great gout of steam and superheated magical energy burst forth from the aft engine ports, twin beacons of raw fuel burning the metal dock behind us into hot liquid ash, and we were away.

"Hang on tight!" I yelled to Tonks. The noise was deafening. The wind howling through my air hot and alive.

The docks collapsed behind us, crushing the Bone-Men under the weight of one of the larger structures in the Lost City. Flecks of burning metal and chunks of bone rose on a wave behind us, a cloud of arrogant dust hot on our tail. But we were flying! The repairs had worked, as my mind told me they always did, if I did it right.

We had burst out of the docks approaching the speed of sound. Already we were miles out over the barren, lifeless ocean. Great crags of ancient coral dead in the endless sun clawed at the hull, but the ship was made of sterner stuff than mere rock. We smashed into the dry reefs, we punched through the dry sea, before my exhalation at escape turned back into bitter resolve at the cost we were paying.

I pulled back on the controls and the bow rose – we shot toward the sky. The burnt orange sky, strewn with effortless cloud. Eternal twilight above the heart of time—

But then the Infernal Clock was no more.

I had broken Time's incessant, eternal struggle. Why was the world – this world, any world – still in one piece? Was everything truly in flux? Could the choices I make be made differently now? No matter. There is more to heaven and earth, Harry, than even you know... and Hell, I suppose. The three are, almost always, indistinguishable from one another.

My head was really killing me. The headache was... killing me.

Soaring up below the clouds, miles above the dead oceanic vista, I got a real good look at what had been happening to Atlantis since I'd been away. It wasn't pretty.

"Harry... Merlin," Tonks breathed.

Voldemort had taken his army from the heart of Forget and returned to Atlantis only minutes before I had, but those minutes were hours

here in the Lost City. Hours the Bone-Men had used to assemble their forces, arrange their onslaught.

The towering skyscrapers and miles of dusty, low buildings were overrun. Creatures of varying size - from the very small to the mammoth – raged over Atlantis with mindless hate, mindless hunger. They were devouring the city, all save the centre tower – Voldemort's tower – and upon the very summit of that a gateway was opening, a way back.

"They're heading for our world, Tonks. I think we ought to do something about that..."

Beyond the city, the large snow-capped mountains, rising for miles above the metropolis, dwarfing even fabled Atlantis, stood uninterested in the battle that was about to get underway. Sentinels of a time gone by so very long ago.

Voldemort could pass between Atlantis and the real world as easy as thought. I could too, now, but he'd been able to do it since Day One. He could even bring half a dozen Death Eaters with him, through the murky waters of dreamt reality. It was how he was built – how he had torn himself apart – that afforded him the shortcut to Atlantis, and he could step back into the real world whenever he wanted...

But he couldn't take his new army that way.

That took time, a bit of patience, and one monumental fucking gateway that was going to open up in the skies above London, if the Dark Lord was to have his way... and I was going to have to let him have it. But not before doing some damage while I could.

It would be nearly September 1st back home, if my math was right. The time spent in Forget, which had been hours to me and Voldemort, three months to Fleur, Tonks, Jason and Grace, would be different again back in the real world.

It would be close, if not dead on, September 1st. My timing was never off. It was time to go back to Hogwarts. It was time to go home.

We were blazing a trail across the sky enough for any demonic soldier to see. The Reminiscence was running hot, the engines burning loud. We hadn't breached the sound barrier, but we had the power to... and I was tempted.

"What do we do then?" Tonks asked. Her hair was a rainbow of violent colour. "This is incredible, Harry!" She laughed – it sounded a touch unhinged. Insanity could be catching.

"We got two wands between us, Tonks." I glanced over the bow and began a fast descent toward the demon-riddled city. "A ship that only just flies, one or two life-threatening wounds, and a bunch of ancient cannons on board that will never fire again. Any ideas?"

Her eyes were wild against the constant sky. Her breath was hot against my face. We were alive, we were dying – moments like these... I wish I could have stopped time.

"I still have your Time-Turner." Tonks reached into her Auror robes, under her shirt, and pulled out the silvery chain from around her neck. "Yes?"

I shook my head. "Deader than dead, if I use that. I've got an idea..."

Tonks brushed my hair back from my brow and kissed my forehead. "Didn't doubt you for a second, kid."

It was like riding a broom, really. Once you figured it out once you never forgot how. It was the same with my memories, and all the years I had spent learning how to first fix then fly one of these badass battle cruisers. I flew down – hard – and I flew fast.

Grace dragged Jason below deck and Tonks strapped herself in next to me. The wind howled through our hair, our bodies were pressed hard against one another. Without the shields or any wards, the force was incredible. We left our stomachs back up somewhere in the lower stratosphere. A rollercoaster ride from hell. I tried to keep it steady for Chronos... and whatever he was doing to heal Fleur.

The Bone-Men had spotted our descent from miles away, and already some – those that could fly – were rising to meet us. I pushed it faster and levelled out about a mile above the lower parts of the city. Almost level with the tip of Voldemort's tower, away in the distance. A great shuddering roar echoed throughout the city as the dark and horrific army challenged me for dominance of the sky.

"Hey, Tonks, have we got any of that minestrone soup left?"

Tonks was gripping the arm of the chair and my arm tightly as we headed down into the city. "Are you kidding? Once the fresh stuff ran out... that soup is all you brought! We've been eating it for the past two months. Remind me to throttle you for that later."

I nodded. "I love that stuff. I haven't eaten anything in days."

"If we don't die in the next five minutes I'll cook it for you myself."

My grin was more of a smirk. "Watch this."

I arced the ship low and we descended between the ruined skyscrapers, diving along the streets and sending dust swirling up behind us in great, roiling clouds. There were dark things in those clouds, with yellow eyes, and they screamed after us with all the fury that had sent Atlantis into decay so long ago.

The city was alive around us. Hideous creations of twisted bone, fused through magic as old as the universe, sought to snuff out the small specks of life that dared to defy them. Overhead the sky was growing dim as Bone-Men borne on heavy leathery wings blocked out the twilight. There were monstrous shapes up there, as twice as large as the Reminiscence. Voldemort had unleashed a force he could never understand. I was about to dent it – severely.

As we flew I kept my bloodied left hand on the steering column and drew my wand with my uninjured right. It wrenched the eternal fragment buried in my shoulder, but the pain was always bearable. I pointed my wand toward the sky, against the encroaching darkness, and sang the song to end the world...

"INCENDIOS..." Flame as hot as the sun travelled up the spine of my wand. "...GRATA!" And exploded on the wings of my new strength, my new understanding, destroyed in the death of the Infernal Clock.

A trail of fire followed in the course of the battleship as we ducked and dived between the skyscrapers, heading up and out of the city with an entire flying army on our backs. The fire was a beacon, in case any were needed, of where I'd been and where I was. I wanted maximum chaos, maximum damage. Voldemort was busy with his gate, but surely he felt the energy I was pouring into this spell...

It was too late to stop me.

I thrust the throttle to the floor and we jerked forward faster than sound. A great sonic boom burst through the wake of fire and blasted all remaining window glass from the buildings around us for several miles. We fled the city; still trailing that fire, back up the range of towering mountains – ten miles high – that had been our crossover point all those weeks ago.

The mountains still awed me in their size and majesty. The most terrific, the most deadly, the most awe-inspiring range of mountains ever conceived. The twisted peaks were covered in electric-blue snow, cast from the sight far below, yet the range extended for miles and miles up toward the heavens.

The peaks brushed the sky, and I wouldn't have been surprised if they pierced the upper reaches of the atmosphere. Great crags of overhanging rock and cliff faces a dozen miles high played tricks with the eye, creating a sense of size so numbing that it couldn't be properly seen.

I was about to blow it all up.

We flew up the mountains, along the length of the ridges, and came upon the vast waterfalls of raw magic we had first seen upon our arrival. It was this raw magic that fuelled the city below, that had kept the lights and the runic magic burning so brightly for so long.

Awe-inspiring.

Deadly.

Majestic.

Ka-boom!

"The odds are long, Tonks!" I roared above the maelstrom. "The odds are long, life's unfair and death's no better! But you know what?"

"What!"

"FUCK THE ODDS!"

I ignited the river of raw magic. The river that flowed down into a vast, unimaginably deep, reservoir of power beneath the city of Atlantis. A reserve of strength that had kept the city alive and powered for over ten-thousand years.

I set it ablaze! A fireball from my wand straight into the cascading falls!

We had seconds before the entire city exploded, before Atlantis crumbled. I wrenched the controls back and we rose toward the twilight sky – a sky I would never see again – the demonic army still screeching after us, as the first explosions rocked the city.

A wave of impossible energy washed over us and we were knocked off course. Heat. Untamed light. The end of a world, the fall of a lost civilisation. I'd exploded a star beneath the city, and it was deafening, chaotically silent. I could almost feel Chronos grinning below deck. I hoped and prayed to a being I didn't believe in that he had Fleur secured through all of this...

"Harry!" Tonks wasn't laughing or grinning anymore. She was terrified.

So was I.

But in the best way.

"This time counts for all, Tonks! Hold on!"

We were still rising, still shooting up through the sky on an enormous cushion of superheated air. I got a glimpse over my shoulder and saw great swaths of Atlantis sinking into a melting pot of fiery liquid magic. Fires and great bursts of energy punched through the surface of the world, spewed forth into the barren sea... The Bone-Men swarmed toward Voldemort's tower, even as his portal began to open...

Counts for all, counts for all, counts for all—

I twirled my wand between my fingers, slashing ancient runes into the air that burnt with sparkling radiance across the sky. We were travelling so fast that I left them in my wake, but the spell was forming behind me, in the fire and the surging wave of Bone-Men still playing catch-up on our tail.

"Take a deep breath!" I yelled, laughing and screaming laughing and screaming laughing and scream— "And count back from ten! Don't worry, it'll all be over soon!"

I inscribed the last rune in the air before me, a silvery trail melting away behind us, and felt a doorway open up in my mind, saw a way through the maelstrom. I glanced at Tonks and saw her eyes distant and amazed – she was seeing the same thing. Good. It had worked.

The sky was still diamonds. Azure, twinkling diamonds under an inferno of soft purple menace. I felt uneasy. I felt out of sorts. I felt like death warmed up.

I slammed the brakes on and we came to a slow, aching stop in midair. The ship hung for a moment on nothing, then the bow listed to the left and suddenly we were heading straight down as light burst across the deck – silver sparks of forever, boss – and we plunged back toward the violent end of Atlantis.

We fell fast – straight through the dozen or so flying monstrosities that had been chasing us, knocking them aside like gnats against a windshield – and then that doorway of the mind clicked open.

The Reminiscence hit a wall... of nothing – of archaic ruin and rune.

We flew forward to brush a sparkling curtain of mist that had formed in our wake. And nothing much happened, save the diamond sky began to fade away, the heat and the light became a wash of bruised purple sky, roiling with clouds of devastating potential, and we left Atlantis behind...

Then it began to hurt.

Of course it did.

Nothing this important could ever be gained easily, or without enough blood spilt to dye the Pacific bright red. I remember thinking that before.

I rode that wave of pain across the space between worlds, rode that motherfucker down through the moments between seconds, and over the impossible gap in forever. It was always, always one helluva ride. Only this time there were no memories, no trips into illusion. We weren't in a world of fantasy anymore, no sir, we were heading back.

Darkness everywhere, and the ship's engines groaned as we moved across nothing into everything. It was tough – like breaking through a bubble made of stone, several miles thick. There was no air, no sound. The inferno we had left behind was already lost and forgotten.

A grim smile crossed my face as I imagined Voldemort atop his tower as the city caved in on itself. He had less than no time to get back, let alone bring his demonic army. Your move, dickhead.

The Reminiscence was falling apart at her seams. We surged on, the world growing lighter around us, and I pictured London in the summer, the blue skies and thick heavy cumulus clouds. The heavy masts of the ship cracked and splintered first, falling down across the deck and over the railings into eternity.

We were so close.

Wild sparks burst from the runes across the control panels. My suit was on fire, so were Tonks' robes. She doused us with water from her wand. This wasn't like the journey to Atlantis from our world – this was worse.

The polished planks along the deck were buckling. Great plates of mythrill were falling from the hull... the ship was screaming a silent death—

"Come on!" I slammed the throttle down hard, as hard as it would go, and the cord holding us between worlds snapped.

We surged forward into daylight, into a clear blue sky and a bright sun. It felt like coming home. The air was cool and fresh, normal. I felt the timer in my head slip back a few gears toward reality. Time reasserted itself – and a tiny shard burned an inch closer to my heart.

The Reminiscence was aflame.

Below us London stretched toward the horizon – grey and brilliant – and the mighty, unconquerable Thames snaked its way through the heart of the great city. It was as good a place as any to put 'er down, and I was putting 'er down whether I wanted to or not.

The engines were spluttering and dying. Either we were running short on petrol, which was unlikely, or some explosion or other had ruptured the lines. It could be repaired – it could always be repaired – but right now I had bigger concerns. Like not crashing into London and igniting the starlight core of the ship.

Which would make London look a lot like Atlantis did now.

Although destroying two cities in less than five minutes was probably some sort of record.

Not today. Not ever, if I had my way.

The Reminiscence didn't fly through the sky so much as fall. I kept the controls pushed back, keeping the bow of the ship flushed

forward and at as high of an angle as we could manage, given the drag and the weight pushing down against us.

I managed to slow our descent, but not much more than that. The main sail was gone, half a dozen spot fires were eating away at the deck, and London was a very big target getting bigger and bigger every second. I could see thousands of cars now, glinting in the sun along the motorways in and out of the city.

I lined us up at the widest part of the Thames I could see – that I guessed we could make, given our airspeed, our rate of descent, and all the luck I had left to me... We were going to hit Chelsea, or Battersea, depending which side of the river—

A bit of quick spellwork slowed our fall. I buffeted the hull with cushions of air, the magic coming to me as quick as thought and as useful as ever. It dug through my headache, shot forth from my wand. Tonks was shooting water over the control panels down to the lower deck, putting out fires.

"Here we go..."

The Thames was upon us. It was going to be a bumpy landing. Both hands on the wheel, my wand between my teeth in a feral grin, I kept the Reminiscence steady and skirted along the top of the river, still travelling way too fast. The air brakes weren't doing much of anything, which is to say nothing, but my cushions of air along the hull were causing some friction and slowing us down.

There was nothing in our way, for which I was eternally grateful, as we hit the water at several hundred miles an hour, skimming across the surface and sending up great gouts of steam from the red-hot hull. Most of the speed was washed off instantly – Tonks and I were thrown around in our restraints – and we began to turn on the water.

I fought against it but the controls tore themselves from my grasp. All that was left was to hold on to Tonks with my bloodied hand and hope for the best. We spun, still mostly skimming the surface of the Thames, and I felt like throwing up.

But we were slowing down – the engines died – the ship listed in the water, but we were coming to a slow stop. The traffic on the Thames was given us a wide emergency berth, and hundreds of people were running along the wharfs and ports along the river, tracking our progress, as we came to a dead stop not a moment too soon.

The Reminiscence floated on the swell for all of three seconds and then settled into the bed of the river, wedged up against Battersea Bridge. The weight of all that gold and mythrill was far too much to keep us afloat. Luckily, the depth of the river was only about fifteen feet. The ship was far too large to sink.

Tonks was gripping my arm – that was in turn gripping her leg. Her nails had drawn blood. She offered me a tentative, uncertain grin and loosed her grasp.

We had made it.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Okay..." I took another breath. It was a bright day. Warm for this time of year. "Okay. You get that soup on, I'll go check on the crew."

Too late, Potter. It was always too late.

"She's gone, Harry." Chronos was wiping the blood from his hands with the linens from Fleur's transfigured bed.

Fleur's blood.

"Gone?" I stepped into the quarters, the tempered fires of misery and beyond burning in my eyes and through my soul. "What do you mean gone?"

The would-be-god before me shrugged. His suit was still immaculately pressed and ironed – not a drop of Fleur's precious blood had stained him. "I healed her, as best I could. Got all the petals out, at least. But..."

I grabbed the son of a bitch by his fine unruffled suit and thrust him up against the not-so-fine wall. His head thumped against the wooden support beams. "I trusted you!"

A glint of anger flared in Chronos' eyes. He pushed me back with very little effort. "And I saved her life! I let you destroy Atlantis! She was mad, Harry James Potter. Delirious and insane. She kept screaming, clawing at me, and as soon as you breached the wall between worlds she Apparated away!"

"She wouldn't do that..." Some of the fire went out of me. "Fleur wouldn't leave me—"

"You changed her as you have changed everything." He cast a hand toward the bloodstained petals near the bed that were just petals now – of a long dead rose. "She saw something, Harry, she saw with the Infernal Clock. It was part of her, as it is part of you..." He pressed a finger to the wound in my shoulder, to the embedded shard of time working its way toward my heart. "And what she saw made her afraid, so very afraid, that she fled into wild ravings, screaming dark and terrible secrets..."

I know I shouldn't have asked. There was work to do – Voldemort was on his miserable way. But I did anyway. "What... what was she saying?"

Damn it all. The farther I went, the farther it hurt. A part of me already knew the answer.

A slow, horrific grin spread across Chronos' face. "The Sleeping God, she screamed, as Hell descended upon the world and brave Harry Potter stood alone before the armies of the Dark Lord and Forget... He is waking!"

Darkness descended like a shroud over my mind. I imagined Fleur desperate and alone, confused and afraid. Naked before the endless fathoms of Time, and seeing me at the heart of it all... truly seeing me... as a stranger, a half-god, ripped sparkling shards of eternity from her stomach.

I bowed my head.

Fleur had abandoned me. My secret was out. She had seen the monster within, the Immortal Mistake...

Oh god... or... Oh God.

Fleur had seen the Wastelands of Time.

A/N: Uh-oh, trouble brewin', boss. But we're back in the real world! Atlantis was great and all (until it got blown up!), but now the fun really begins. I've been waiting to write half of these scenes since about Chapter 11, where I had this vague weird idea of where the story was heading. Oh yeah, whaddayathunk? A few plot points resolved, a few more questions raised – what's happened to Fleur?

Still aiming for 2,000 reviews before the story ends and we begin with the SEQUEL. Oh yeah, there'll be a sequel, if you missed that missive earlier. So thanks for reading, folks, and hopefully reviewing...

-Joe

PS: (2000!)

Chapter 27 – Discarding Revolution

Should the sky start to fall I will keep you safe...

~Five For Fighting

"Can you dig the petal out of my shoulder?"

"Don't you mean the impossible shard of eternity? And no. No I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

Chronos shrugged and rubbed his face. He looked tired, all things considered. "Both. Neither. Does it matter? I can't touch you now, Harry Potter, not for more than a second. The consequences of our coming into physical contact would be..." He shook his head. "This world has grown on me. I'd hate to see it end in fire once more."

"Aye, but that's usually how the dice fall."

I sighed and gained my feet. I looked at Fleur's bloodied and scuffed bed. The same sheets we had made love in some short hours ago – three months for her – ruined. What had happened? She had fled as we had punched back through into the real world, into the sky above London. Apparated away... Had we been through before she had done it? Was she lost to all of time and space? Or was she home with her family? Alive and... sane? No, probably not.

Not if she had seen the truth of me.

"Nothing to be done now." I spoke to myself but Chronos laughed.

"Everything to be done now! Voldemort will follow you back with whatever remnants of his army survived your inferno. "

That he would. "And what's your game in all of this?" I didn't care, actually, but information was power, and I hadn't quite given up yet. Close, very close. Even defiance could have its end. "Why save Fleur? Why aid me at all now that Atlantis is gone?"

"No time for this, Harry Potter, yes, yes."

"Answer me!"

Chronos turned sideways into nothing and disappeared. There was a small clap as air rushed back into the space he had been occupying. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, holding my head in my hands. Fleur. I was really fucking hungry, and there was canned soup nearby. And beer! Oh sweet, sweet Jesus, I was back in the land of milk and honey.

So many things to do, so little time.

And we were adrift in the Thames in full view of Muggle London. The Ministry would only be minutes away, descending with memory charms and plenty of cause to arrest me. I didn't have any patience for arrogant Aurors – not ever again. There was also that whole framed assassination thing from a month ago to worry about.

I put on my best grim and determined look, ignored the pain in my head and in my chest, and resolved to sleep when I was dead.

It's a long, long way back home, hero.

I emerged back on deck, can of cold soup dripping down my hand, to find Tonks still putting out spot fires. There was warm smoke on the air, brushing against my face, as I drank the cold minestrone soup straight from the can.

The Reminiscence was beaten to all hell and back. I guess we had to take the bumps anyway they came, even if it left us listing in the Thames with a crowd of onlookers gawping down over the side of Battersea Bridge overhead.

"Ahoy, there!" I called up to the sea of stunned faces framed against the clouds above. "Don't worry, no one's sinking my battleship! Is it the first of September?"

There were a few nods among the shocked and incredulous audience.

"Harry, the Ministry won't be far away," Tonks said. Her hair was a violent shade of purple, her eyes cautious yet concerned. "Is Fleur...?"

"Fleur's alive." I felt a strange tug of regret in my chest. Either that or the shard of the Infernal Clock was still squirming around in there. "She's left us. Apparated away. Hopefully to her home... but she's alive."

"She left?" Tonks paused. "And Jason and Grace?"

"Stunned. Below deck." Jason was unconscious, a serious blow to the head. "Arnair may need a touch of healing, though."

"Can you fly this thing out of here?"

I smirked. The ship would still fly - barely. "Should I fly it out of here? You're still employed by the Ministry, Tonks. Shouldn't you be detaining me or something? I pretty much just shot down the Statutes of Secrecy in a blaze of bloody flaming glory and pissed on the ashes."

Tonks' smile shone with young, fresh, and near-malevolent fire. "Why would I detain you now? You've got Voldemort on the run, Harry."

I laughed and Tonks disappeared below deck. Her words brought me back to real time, however, out of memory and regret over Fleur and my many badass wounds. I gazed up at the cloudy sky, beyond the crowds of stunned onlookers and the skyscrapers of London. The Dark Lord would be cutting through soon – any moment – with the remnants of his demonic army.

Did I have Voldemort on the run?

Have I ever had Voldemort on the run?

The influx of memory that went shooting through my mind was painful. Despite the lengths I'd gone to, all the games played and all the time

travelled, I could never recall my foreknowledge being a significant advantage when it came down to the kill or be killed in the final, epic battle.

That particular battle wasn't fought with much magical skill, garnered from the understanding afforded to us by the Infernal Clock or not. It was a battle of wits and wills – of determination and broken freedom – and was always played out on a field beyond normal understanding.

But that fight wasn't today. It was too soon, far too soon, for anything that ethereal.

Today I fought for London – for beer and chips, for the ignorant masses, for myself, most of all, because killing bad things was what I did. I was good at it, more than anything else. And oh well, but I would make no excuses.

"Are you okay?" some brave soul called from the bridge above.

I looked up, rubbing my chest just over my heart. That sharp, deadly petal was painful, sure, but it was a numbing kind of pain. I didn't think I could extract it, not now. There was also a small part of me wondering what would happen if I left it to do whatever it would. It was a shard of Time, after all, and that fickle bitch had helped me come this far.

So, so far. Eh.

"Never better, mate," I called back up, offering a quick salute.

There was a charge of suspended disbelief hanging in the air, blowing in on the salty breeze, under the guise of magic dressed to impress. It was a warm September's day, the first of the year, and I had to be getting on with all manner of disagreeable behaviour.

I had wars to start. I had a war or two to end.

The polished deck, burnt and crispy now, creaked underfoot as I climbed back up to the command column of the Reminiscence. She would fly again. Everything looked in one piece, if a little fried and

frayed, below deck. The starlight core was intact, the fuel lines all in the clear. We had lost power and fallen like a brick punching back through – deadweight – but the cross from Atlantis had merely stalled my awesome battleship.

I lowered myself into the seat before the control column. The panels were dark and scorched. I started pushing buttons, keeping one hand on the wheel. Crystals and cool black stone panels began to glow with old Atlantean runes. A heavy, constant vibration ran throughout the ship and the deck beneath my feet. At my back, the engines began to churn the waters of the Thames into a bubbly froth.

Hot steam rose in my wake as I tilted the ship back to flush against the Battersea Bridge. The entire control column shook as I righted the Reminiscence and we began to rise off the river's bed. The weight of all the riches seized from Atlantis pulled against me, but the runes flared as bright as ever and after a moment's effort fighting with the wheel the ship hovered a foot above the Thames, dripping muddy water back down into the river.

"Very good," I said to myself. There was a reckoning coming, of that I was sure. That tension of unseen magic was almost thick enough to see. There was very little time, maybe less than an hour, before Voldemort made his presence felt and London was plunged into war.

I started gathering my magic. Gathering my new understanding, unleashed upon the remnants of the Infernal Clock. Voldemort wanted a fight, did he? A war upon the righteous and the unworthy...

I gathered my power, resolved my intent into something hard and fierce, cold and detached. Storm clouds began to gather across my mind – there I found power akin to insanity brewing below scarcely understood nightmare.

A slow, careful anarchy spread across my face. The Reminiscence surged forward across the Thames and up into the darkening sky.

Tessa.

Her name was Tessa.

More and more my thoughts return to her. She was someone that mattered. A connection made not through blood and circumstance. A relationship forged not through the cold heat and tragedy of war.

Also, she was cute.

"There's this new Malaysian restaurant in Leederville I want to try, Harry."

"Oh?"

"Word is the best shredded beef in the world."

I nodded. "We'll get some takeaway, head up to Kings Park with a picnic blanket and a bottle of scotch."

Tessa made a face. "How can you drink that stuff? It's too strong. A nice bottle of red wine, if you please."

To tell her I start my day with two fifths of Glenlivet 12 Year Old just to deal with the nightmares would not be fair. It would be cruel – I was a lot of things, none of them truly pure, but I was never cruel to those I loved. Never.

It was one redeeming quality within a miasma of failed and flawed personality.

"Tessa, I'm really glad I met you."

"I could have known you forever."

"I love you."

There was no bullshit in my feelings for the small, dark haired girl with the crystal blue eyes. Dark hair with a streak of soft blonde. Large, kind eyes and a sharp nose. She was only tiny, five feet and change, but beautiful. She never wore make-up, but she didn't need it... Her face was captivating. Plain and friendly, more than enough to inspire desire.

Moments of time – shattered now – lost in lives that only I will ever remember. And that apathy, caught in a web of stolen moments, may just be to the good people out there, the saddest thing in the world.

Thought was real, and the physical nothing save illusion. That ironic sentiment may one day prove to be my undoing.

Either that, or the final death of Time as it ground my essence to dust upon the shattered, wasted gears of the Infernal Clock.

"I love you too, Harry."

I can almost forgive myself for making her love a monster. Almost.

It was all coming to a head now.

All the lives. All the years. All the brief moments between one second and the next. So many brief, unflattering moments... Dust in the wind. That same wraithlike wind that belongs to other worlds – other times and other crimes, if ya follow me.

The Reminiscence shook in the skies above London. The ancient warship was in one piece, for the most part. The main mast had fallen, the white panels along the hull were cracked and the decking was scorched by the inferno of Atlantis, but we were still airworthy. Still soldiering on toward the inevitable destruction just over the horizon.

Life... will go on. It will go on. It will leave me behind. I can annihilate worlds – I just did – I can undo time, and perchance to dream upon the vagrant, valuable fields of the-other-way-around... and life will go on. Voldemort had assumed command over a demonic, skeletal army of intelligent nightmares.

Our exposure to the Infernal Clock had changed us both.

And it was time now to undo past mistakes.

Which meant I needed to be at my best, my most courageous and self-sacrificing. It meant I needed a drink. Several drinks – and a cigar or two. What better place than London to get that around midday?

I steered the Reminiscence low through the sky over Westminster. If memory served, and it often did – time and time again – there was a quaint little pub along Northumberland Street that opened early. It also stocked scotch and Romeo & Juliet cigars.

The ship was running near silent as I descended through the skies, scanning the smoky streets under the darkening heavens. Storm clouds were brewing, unnatural for this time of year, but then I may have had a hand in that. Strange ideas, strange spells and strange understanding flowed through my mind. I was altering the weather, preparing a battleground.

"Where we headed, Harry?" Tonks asked. She had returned from healing Arnair. Just a bump on the head. Grace was making sure he didn't pass out down below. "The Ministry has a helluva mess to clean up back at Battersea, but they won't be far behind."

I nodded. "I need sustenance for the fight ahead, sweetheart." There was liquid courage in fine, aged scotch. Not that I really needed courage. I was just battered and beaten and bleeding all down my ragged thousand-dollar suit. A shattered shard of eternal-time was burrowing down through my chest toward my heart and the best thing about this world, sweet Fleur, had abandoned me. "Just enough to keep me on my feet."

"The sky... the clouds..." Tonks hesitated. She gazed up from our rather unique vantage point at the roiling storm clouds. Low rumbles of tentative thunder shook the atmosphere. "Is that Voldemort's doing?"

"No, that's mine. Ha, there it is, Northumberland Street. Hang on, we're going in."

The ship was managing quite well, all things considered. At least the vibrations had stopped, which may or may not have been a good sign,

and the deck had ceased smouldering. I took us down above the terraced houses, above the road, gaining wide-eyed and awed stares from the pedestrians below. I suppose I was an impressive sight.

I pulled the Reminiscence to a hovering stop thirty feet above the red-brick façade of the Sherlock Holmes. There was a nice, intimate roof garden atop of the place. The engines idled and only a faint draft of warm air disturbed the plants in their hanging baskets alongside the old-fashioned lanterns running parallel to the establishment.

I grinned at Tonks, who returned my look with something akin to befuddled, fearful, disbelief. "A pub, Harry? You're going to the pub?"

"Accio briefcase!" I waited a moment and my worn and bruised briefcase, so kindly given to me by the goblins right back on Day One, shot out of one of the charred holes in the decking and into my hand. It held my fake I.D., my Muggle currency, as well as my hallowed invisibility cloak and one or two other bits and pieces. "Join me for a drink?"

"No." Tonks shook her head. "Harry, no. You can't hang around – the Ministry will only be minutes away."

"I'm counting on it." I made a token effort to brush back my unruly hair and sweep some of the ash and dust from my ruined suit. At least the jacket covered the blood-soaked shirt beneath. A few gestures with my wand and I patched a the holes in the silk. "How do I look?"

"Not well."

I laughed, "You're being too kind", and disappeared from the Reminiscence down onto the crowded street below.

None of the Muggle pedestrians or bystanders saw me appear out of nothing, as all heads were craned toward the sky, toward the scorched and failing hull of my battleship hovering just out of reach above the pub. I straightened my glasses, dug around in my case for fifty quid, and headed inside.

I was greeted immediately by that warm, comforting smell of stale beer and old mahogany furniture. A scent like coming home, a taste of relaxation and forgetful memory, engrained into the carpet and hung upon the very atmosphere of the pub.

It was just after midday, and there were one or two old men near the bar, carrying the look of lifelong bachelors, sipping cool pints of lager and watching an Arsenal match on the TV. I stood there in the doorway for a moment, admiring the place, wishing I could just sit down and sleep, until the bartender cleared his throat and looked at me pointedly.

"Afternoon, son." He was a gruff man, shaven head and simple white shirt over a toned and muscular form. Magic or not, he had a look about him that said he'd kicked a lot of kids out of pubs in his time.

I strolled over to the bar, past an array of Baker Street photos in black and white along the wall. The light was dull, the velvet running along the floor dark green and stained. There was a pool table coated in chalk dust. I was wasting far too much time admiring this place but, by god, it did feel like coming home. Atlantis had been wonderful – Atlantis was always painfully wonderful – but it never felt real, not as real as this.

"How's your day, boss?" I asked, pulling up a stool against the bar. I winced as I lowered myself into it. That shard in my chest was going to be a problem, I decided.

"You know you can't be in here without a parent or guardian, kid."

I felt a brief flare of irrational anger... I'm older than the current millennium, you dolt... that was just so much wild insanity. Instead of anger, I grinned and pulled out the fake Muggle driver's licence the goblins had supplied.

"I'm older than I look." I handed him the card. There was a full suit of armour standing a silent vigil at the corner of the bar. It held a fake axe, decorative only, and atop its head was one of those old fashioned Captain's caps, embroidered with golden feathers and a linked tassel.

Nice.

The bartender shrugged and handed me back my fake I.D. "What can I get for you, Mr. Rafe?"

I almost gave the game away by pausing on the false name, but I was too well practiced at this. My mouth was already working before my brain caught up with it. "Pint of Stella, and two Romeo and Juliet's, if you please."

"Clip and light? Twenty-eight and sixty."

I slid a crisp fifty-pound note across the bar as the man deftly pulled a pint and reached above the bar for the cigars. He knew his trade as the beer, with only a quarter inch of head, sat frosty in front of me and he clipped the cigar, lighting it with a long wooden match.

"What are all those people doing outside?" he asked me as I drained half the pint in the best part of three seconds.

"Hmm? Oh, looks like a storm – and I think the Air Force are doing some training or something. Strange plane flying over the city."

The bartender shrugged and wiped down the spotless mahogany finish with a spotless cloth. I had vague memories of meeting this man before, life before life before life, and I think he was half the reason I chose this place to get my pre-battle drinks on. He was very unassuming, very professional, yet he could break even the hardest motherfucker in half. He was me, in a way, without all the random insanity and crude jokes.

I finished the pint and called for another. The first taste of the cigar against my lips was bliss, utter bliss. It was only supposed to be my soul that was blasted back through time when I failed – what was left of it, anyway – but I guess those remnants were stained with tobacco, because I'd been dying for a sweet, sweet smoke for weeks...

"You're not working today?" the bartender asked me, just making small talk, as he refreshed my beverage.

"I may have to go in this afternoon," I said, checking the mental clock in my head. Cords of impossible magic were strung along and through my mind, creating the storm outside, charging the atmosphere with devastating potential. But not all of that was my doing. Voldemort was on his way, within the hour, and the force of his will and intent were pressing against London, against the whole wide world. Forces were starting to truly clash.

"What is it you do?"

"Self-employed." I blinked and the first flash of lightning lit up the darkening world outside. Thunder followed, rumbling low through the bar. Next would come violence.

"Oh?"

"Rather dull stuff, really. Few benefits, long hours, and the clients I have to deal with are... just evil." I laughed. "Hence the need for a few pints before I—Wait, hang on a minute..." My eyes travelled beyond the bartender to a solid locked cabinet behind him, along the wall covered with various bottles of spirits and whiskeys. "Is that an unopened bottle of fifty-year old Glenfiddich scotch?"

Now I really knew what half-forgotten memories had guided me back to this particular pub.

"Yes it is. And it's been sitting in that cabinet for ten years." The bartender shrugged. "My father won it in a Best British Pub competition back in the eighties. No one has ever been game enough to try it."

"What?" I was outraged. "Why?"

"Because it's twelve-hundred quid for two-fingers worth." He laughed. "Or ten-thousand for the bottle, if you're really in the market, Rafe."

Thunder again – the windows of the pub shook in their frames – and I took a long drag on my cigar, tapping the ash into an ashtray, and

thinking about the thousands of pounds in my briefcase. So much of my days were spent dealing with ash and smoke.

"What happened to your hand, if you don't mind me asking? That looks recent."

I shrugged, moving the stumps of the two missing fingers on my left hand as best I could. It took me a moment to remember where I'd lost them, but soon enough I recalled the explosion in the cavern deep beneath the heart of Italy. The Gates of Atlantis. Some Auror or goblin or Orc-Mare had blasted me for six. It was rare for me to stay in one piece throughout this old game.

"Same shit different day, friend." I drained the last of my second pint. I'd been in the pub five minutes. If I were judging things right, I had another seven before the Ministry would be upon the Reminiscence. "Small accident at work."

The bartender nodded. "Another?"

"One more for the road, mate." Her name was Tessa. "One more for the road..."

I wondered on Fleur for a moment as my third beer was drawn and the shard in my chest dug half an inch deeper. It felt like a thin sliver of cool, scorching ice – fuelled with rage and chaos and power. It felt like Time. It didn't like me thinking of Fleur. Five minutes and forty-seven seconds. Something told me that was all the time I had before the Ministry arrived. I didn't doubt it.

"I've travelled through time, you know."

"Is that so?"

"You don't believe me."

"We're all travelling through time, mate, one second at a time."

Truth enough to that, I suppose. I liked this guy. "And her name was Tessa... I find my thoughts returning to her more and more now. I don't know why."

"Girlfriend?"

"Once upon a time."

"You look too young for 'once upon a time'."

I laughed. "Some people live fifty years in five minutes, buddy." And the downside... "Or five minutes in fifty years." I sighed. "It already feels like I'm losing."

The bartender, whatever his name was, took the ten quid I'd left on the bar for my third pint and gave me a fiver and coin in change. "Losing what?"

"I don't know anymore, but I'll tell you one thing..."

"Mike. Name's Mike."

I inclined my head and tipped my glass. "I'll tell you one thing, Mike. You throw in that awesome cap on the armour and we've got a deal on the Glenfiddich."

There were wars – great wars, bloody wars, time wars... I was there, so very long ago. Other lives and other crimes, you see. No... you don't see. You can't see.

It never happened for you.

As soon as I apparated back up onto the Reminiscence I was met against the points of seven wands. The best response I could muster was a yawn – I was, after all, very tired. But I could sleep when I was dead and I'd die before I slept, so I focused my attention on the Aurors.

There were seven of them. Looking rather resplendent in their fine cut identical robes. Auror robes always looked pretty cool. They were tight, slim, and sort of made the eye slide around the wearer's form. Bit of disorientation was always good battle practice.

I recognised Kingsley Shacklebolt, John Dawlish and one of the younger women with a severe ponytail and sharp brow. The rest were just a blur of time gone by, faceless grunts of a Ministry too far gone to recover... without revolution.

A cool, wet wind blew across the bow of my battleship. I had appeared in between the seven Aurors and my own lone deserter, Nymphadora Tonks. It was really dark now, day to night, and the growing potential in the storm overhead had charged the air with static nitrogen.

We could all taste the energy of the oncoming madness.

"So this is your doing, Harry Potter?" Kingsley asked in his broad, calm baritone of a voice. "This ship... your use of underage magic. Do you have any idea just how many laws you have broken today?"

"I stopped counting at thirty two. How have you been, Kingsley? I hear your lot has been looking to speak with me." I gestured at the groups of three standing either side of the large man. "Some rubbish about an assassination, or something."

Near silent drops of cool rainwater drummed against the deck of the Reminiscence. I looked up to the sky, to the bulging, bruised clouds, and licked my lips. There was very little time. Work to be done, lives to be saved, enemies to be crushed.

"Harry, just come with us and we'll speak to Dumbledore—"

"You can't change the weather," I said softly. What had been a warm summer's day was now darkness in the heart of faux-winter. My doing. My storm. My weather. I was never innocent in all of this, foolish to even think so... "You Aurors have something I need."

I drew my wand and tossed my briefcase aside. My new bottle of scotch was safely wrapped inside the invisibility cloak. My awesome Captain's cap, sitting firmly atop my head, fit like a glove. I looked pretty badass against London in the throes of power unseen.

"Have the goblins demanded my head on a platter yet?" I asked Kingsley.

"Harry," Tonks warned, whispering in my ear. "Don't raise your wand unless you mean to use it."

"That's another matter the Ministry wants to talk to you about," Kingsley said. "They claim you stole from their vaults and killed some of their kinsman in Italy."

"Deceitful little fuckers." I laughed up at the sky and lightning cracked, thunder roared. The world was inches away from tearing itself apart! The real fireworks had yet to be ignited. "Voldemort will be joining us in a moment."

One or two of the Aurors visibly paled. Here I was, the Chosen One, invoking the Dark Lord's name as if over drinks. Madness, chaos, insanity – this tale wouldn't be worth living without them.

"Come now, Potter," John Dawlish said, brandishing his wand. "You need to get this ship out of here and surrender your wand—"

There was a blazing flash of warm orange light and Fawkes, Dumbledore's loyal and familiar phoenix, appeared in the air before me, wreathed in flame. His twin-beaded eyes reflected the forks of sizzling lightning leaping through the clouds far overhead. Gripped in the majestic bird's talons was a scrap of old parchment.

I reached out and grabbed the letter and Fawkes disappeared once more into flame.

Harry,

Surrender nothing. We are prepared.

-AD

Well, at least the old man still had some faith in me. We are prepared. I had to take that to mean he had followed the instructions in the letter I had sent him before Atlantis. Neville Longbottom should have done the same and completed the task I set him upon our chance meeting at PORTUS nearly a month ago now.

Sharp lances of pain accompanied the memory. I was back in the real world, into the plans I had set in motion before Atlantis, and my memories were burning through my mind, trying to make some kind of linear sense out of pure chaos. I had met Neville, of that I was sure, with Fleur.

My head throbbed as I tried to recall the last time I'd seen him. Fifth-year, the Hogwarts Express, barely a month or two ago, but then... it had been years. Years after he'd taken a Killing Curse to protect Hannah Abbott and Susan Bones from death... just one way Neville had gone out over the aching lifetimes in my head.

He always died in style. That was something, I suppose. Some people aren't meant to do anything less.

Some people aren't meant to grow old either.

Dumbledore and Longbottom, upon which spun the whole foundation of my plan to best the Dark Lord today. I could have done far, far worse.

I scrunched Dumbledore's note in my fist and let the wind carry it away. "Very well," I said. "Surrender nothing." The moment I raised my wand the Aurors wouldn't falter. Kingsley would probably concede a stunning spell to keep up appearances, even though he was more Dumbledore's man than the Ministry's.

"Harry..." Tonks whispered. She sensed my intent. "Please don't hurt them."

Was I that far gone that Tonks thought I would? Maybe that wild insanity was a lot more visible than I thought. Oh well.

I raised my wand against Dawlish, because that guy was a dick.

As predicted, the seven Aurors did not hesitate. They fanned out, widening in a half-circle around me on the other side of the ship's splintered mast. Wands appeared as if by thought, bright red light surging forth on the wings of their intent.

"Stupefy!" Dawlish cried.

The rest of the Ministry's finest cast non-verbal magic.

Kingsley fell back, summoning a wide shield charm against any spells I managed to sling. The woman who looked familiar cut a deep slash through the air, blue light tinged silver – confusion hex – and the others moved to surround me, a few training their wands against Tonks.

I watched all this happen in a detached, weary manner. The moves were so predictable, so goddamn familiar. I had been here before, at the end of all these wands. Already I had a rune of ancient Atlantis sketched before me, ready to deflect and destroy...

Only this time something felt different. Something felt... new. The shard in my chest flared raw agony through my body and all at once it was as if I were viewing the world slowed down. My perception of reality shook, my head spun, and I watched the crimson, unconscious malice in Dawlish's stunner ache towards me in slow motion.

Time had skewed. I knew and understood it instinctively. After all, if I knew anything, it was Time.

Kingsley was still backing away, but so very slowly. His shield flared to life in mere fractions of a second, yet the long cone of protective light took close to ten seconds to materialize. The other Aurors moved as if underwater, caught in quicksand, against a fierce wind. Their expressions were clear – determined attack and defence, but I had all the time in the world.

The Infernal Clock was at work inside of me.

My heart was beating a thousand miles a second but I was calm despite the pain. My perception of time had become hypersensitive. Each passing millisecond was a moment I could analyse, assess, and react against accordingly.

This was fucking brilliant.

I took a step back and to the left, out of the path of Dawlish's stunner and the female Auror's confusion hex. I could have danced amongst them if I had the desire. I did not. Shacklebolt looked downright furious that I'd forced the Aurors into confrontation. His grim expression and swift shield charm suggested my name had been added to yet another Shit List.

Life flared into my rune, quickly scratched into the air along the tip of my wand. It was only a small thing, the size of a galleon, but it shone with pure silver radiance against the encroaching darkness. We were all aglow in the haze of spellfire. My magic had not been slowed – it was merely, rather amazingly, my perception of time, my ability to process one instant to the next, that had changed.

To the Aurors, I would've been a near-invisible blur.

My rune gained depth, dimension, spinning on the air as fast as sound. Indeed, a small shockwave blasted out from the rune, near deafening, and arcs of crystal light burst forth in clear, chaotic domes. The rune beget magic, and became a wave of intent.

I took a step to the side and time, Time, time, snapped back into place like an elastic band pulled taut and released. Sound rushed back into my ears, more than a dull buzzing, but alive with the storm, the magic, the high-pitched mockery of my own laughter!

"GET OFF MY LAWN!" I roared.

My magic, the rune, surged out across the air, cutting through and annihilating Dawlish's stunner and the confusion hex. The Aurors had less than a second to react. Even Kingsley, the best of them, was caught unawares...

The light past through his shield, shattering it into a waterfall of blue sparks, and then cut through the entire wedge of Aurors like a hot knife through butter. They all froze, paled, and then crumpled as one against the unconquerable deck of the Reminiscence.

Lightning flashed, drops of cold rainwater splashed, and I had clashed, feeling not at all abashed that I had thrashed, the elite of the Wizarding World.

Seven wands clattered to the decking as the Aurors lay in a slump on top of one another. I spun my wand in a cool circle and shoved it back into my jacket pocket.

Tonks dashed forward from behind me. "Harry, what did you—?"

"Atlantean stunner – the way it should be done, Tonks. Don't worry, they're just knocked out."

Tonks moved between her fallen colleagues, using her wand to shift them off of each other. "I've never seen anyone move as fast as you just did."

I tentatively rubbed the gash in my shoulder, the ever-deepening wound through which the linchpin of all Time had buried itself. "Kingsley is going to be so pissed off when he wakes up."

Tonks nodded, trying to fight a small smile. "Let's not be here when he does then. This is my job, you know, Harry. I'll be sacked for this. Then arrested."

"Or arrested then sacked. Heh. Either way, you can work with me, remember." I moved between the Aurors, collecting their wands, until I had all seven. "Together we'll end a war."

"What are you taking their wands for?"

"Because eight wands are better than one."

"Okay..."

Small hailstones began to dash against the deck of my battleship. Tiny things, just little flecks of ice. My will and intent were turning this storm into something truly fierce. Soon there would be snow, localised over London, a blizzard at the end of summer. The Muggles would be starting to worry.

Tonks' hair flickered between bubblegum-pink, luscious-blond, fiery-red, and deceptive-green. I loved the way it did that. I could watch her for hours. Hours I never had to spare. It was getting cold now, and almost deathly quiet. There were a thousand things that needed doing, least of all was figuring out what the shard of the Infernal Clock was doing to my insides. Despite the pain, it had been suspiciously beneficial so far...

My thoughts turned briefly back to Fleur, but I shook them away... sifted them down through the headache... and kept my focus on the moments ahead.

"What are we going to do with this lot?" Tonks asked.

"Let's drop them off in the beer garden in the pub below. They're gonna want a drink when they wake up and see what's eaten its way through the sky."

And what's left to say then, when nothing ever changes... when every roll of the dice comes up snake eyes. Fuckin' crimson snake eyes.

"You're making a mistake, Harry."

"Tessa isn't a mistake. I lost Fleur, I lost Tonks... so many times." I shook my head to clear the chaos. "I love her."

"You only love her because of who she reminds you of."

My anger flared. "Perhaps I love her despite who she reminds me of!"

There are only so many chances I can take.

And I had pretty much run out of all of them.

A bitter pill to swallow, as I steered the Reminiscence high above London. Tonks, Grace and Jason stood at my back. All of them looking a little worse for wear. Jason had a nasty looking bruise spreading down the side of his face, but his grim expression was solid enough to do his resolve justice.

The ship was ensconced within a mantle of protective magic. A shield designed to reflect and deflect the worsening weather, as well as the brutal attack that was only minutes away now.

"You see," I told Jason and Grace. "It's easy. One of you will steer, just like this..." I moved the control column back and forth, tilting the ship down and just under the heavy storm clouds. "The other can control balance, yaw, pitch – just like this, using the crystal platform. Like driving a car, folks, just remember to keep us out of the way of the big stuff."

"The big stuff?" Tonks dared ask.

"Bone-Men, my dear, shambling and writhing across the sky." I chuckled. "And the Dark Lord, of course. Although if I'm right, he won't hang around here for long." Enough to trade a few punches, perhaps, but that wasn't how this game usually played out.

Flashes of other lives, of other storms and the same old headache, had Voldemort leaving the Ministry to deal with the catastrophe that was about to fall on London, while he headed north, commanding his newfound strength and power, against Hogwarts.

We are prepared, Dumbledore's brief missive had said, which meant our slim chance of success had grown a little fatter.

The streetlamps had come on in London far below. Big Ben and the Tower Bridge were lit up for the whole world to see. From our higher vantage point, I could glimpse clear blue sky miles away in the distance – way beyond the outskirts of the city. My storm was centred

over the bridge between worlds. The first few flakes of snow had begun to fall.

"What about all the people down there, Harry? The Ministry hasn't had time to do anything but try and stop you."

"I know, Tonks, I know." There would be damage to the city's infrastructure, and more severe damage to its residents, but I had a few tricks up my sleeve to minimise the chaos.

I drew my wand and started sketching runes in the air, one after another, and dispersing them into the wind. Streaks of coloured light, greens and oranges and yellows, whipped between the fresh snowfalls and descended over the city. Tiny sparks of good intentions.

I blanketed the city in suggestion, in a massive focus of magical repellent. There was no way the city could be evacuated, none at all on the timeframe we had, but it would be far safer indoors than out. My charms settled over London at midday, the sky as dark as night, and whispered into the ears of all those who stood gawking at the heavens, to all those who were exposed against the madness.

Head inside... safer inside... get off the street...

Waves of my thoughts were pressed into the minds of the millions of people below, urging them to get inside, out of the cold and the snow, to perhaps call in sick after lunch, to get home and lock the door. Pulses of suggestion, of hints and ideas. It was the best I could do without covering the city in a layer of magic akin to the Imperius Curse. And even I wasn't far gone enough to attempt to fuck with so many minds.

You don't know that, a soft voice whispered. It sounded like Chronos. He wouldn't be far away, if I understood anything of the demigod. "You can't change the weather, maybe yes maybe no, and I don't want anyone doing anything too brave here, okay."

"Brave or stupid?" Jason asked, rubbing the growth of stubble on his cheeks. "Only a few short months ago I was lecturing on the forgotten mythology of Atlantis, and now here we are on a ship made ten-

thousand years ago by those very same Atlanteans. Brave and stupid seem to go hand in hand with Harry Potter."

I laughed. "When all this is over later on tonight, you and I need to drink some fifty year old scotch."

"I hope I'm invited to that party," Grace said, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder. "There are many things that need explaining, Harry."

"I'm sure there are – but right now we're going to war. Look..."

Through the exotic, heavy sky, under and across the bulging storm clouds and through the heavy gales of snow and sleet, hail and rain, a small dot of light pierced the darkness. It was a tiny thing, glowing in the sky over London just two miles from where I steered the Reminiscence against the storm, but it was what I had been waiting for.

My stomach lurched at the sight of it. A wave of nausea unrelated to my wounds and fatigue gnawed at my insides. I saw the world through double vision, through the eyes of a madman, and felt the very atmosphere splintering along its unseen panes. Cracks of invisible force rippled outwards across reality.

"You feel that?" I asked. "Of course you do. That's Atlantis burning, ladies and gentleman, mere seconds after we left it. God bless the causality of unnatural timelines."

"It feels wrong, Harry, just like that city did."

"This is where everything changes, Tonks. Where it becomes a war of forces not meant to exist in our world. A contest against nightmare and worse. But we'll soldier on, fight the good fight, and keep hoping for the best. Don't pretend you're not a little excited!"

Lightning tore across the clouds and I laughed against the blizzard, even as that distant light dimmed and a shadow darker than the stormy sky, darker than crimson midnight, spread forth from a place between worlds.

I reached into my pocket and removed the second cigar I'd bought only a half hour ago. Mike the bartender had clipped it for me, and now I lit it with a flame from the tip of my wand. A little something to steady my nerves...

"Those things will kill you," Tonks said, but her voice was distant, her eyes on the darkened patch of midnight sky. The wind blew her pale sapphire hair around her young, beautiful face perfectly.

The sea at storm, I thought.

There were moving shadows in the sky now. And then all at once a deafening, earth-shattering, bang. The noise of a world ending beyond the abyss flooded into Great Britain, over London, and a maelstrom of ignited raw magic, of fire and blood and bone, spewed forth into existence. Amid all that chaos...

...the Dark Lord Voldemort.

The Shambling Bone-Men burst through into a world unknown to them for ten thousand years. A mere fraction of their true number poured into our reality from Atlantis. The rest had burned in the fires of my wand, as they always did, but still hundreds if not thousands of the creatures had followed Voldemort back across the void.

And other skeletal things, too, of tremendous size and devastating strength.

Together at the control column of the Reminiscence alongside Jason, Tonks and Grace, I stepped forward to the edge of the ship and beheld a mammoth being, a creature of long, yellowed bone, the size of Hogwarts, as it tore into the world amidst the suffering of its fellows.

"So much for the Statutes of Secrecy..." Tonks managed, her voice almost lost against the gigantic size of what we had to face. Dusty bone, ancient and terrible, filled the sky now – a blaze of creatures brought forth from a disturbed, eternal grave.

Great platforms of that same bone, demonic airships of long ago, ripped through the gap, carrying Bone-Men that couldn't fly, that were

the last remnants of the army from deep within Forget. It would be upon those floating carcasses I would find Voldemort, but not yet. The big bastard at the forefront of the army needed to be dealt with first, before it decided to crush London.

I whispered a sonorous charm to amplify my voice and then started laughing. A slow, steady laughter, mocking the decimated army I saw before me. Mocking the darkness arising from a lost nation, and drawing the attention of creatures not even close to human upon little old me.

The giant skeletal face turned to behold me, floating in the sky only a half-mile away. Its gaze was alien, its eyes hollow and dead. There was no reasoning with such a monstrosity. Naught but fire would end this.

"YOU!" The voice was distorted – deep and violent. It sounded like a thousand drums scraping across time. A million buzzing horns blown from the depths of perdition.

And it had recognised me.

"Hey there, pretty boy!" I screamed at the horrific demon, at a face that dwarfed the Reminiscence and cast the whole of London within its grim shadow. "Where's your ugly son of a bitch master?"

Voldemort was within the storm. I could feel him. My scar was burning; a slow line of blood dripping from the old wound and down my face. The twisted and impossible bone-ships, surrounded by swarms of airborne demon spawn, hid him and his complement of Death Eaters from sight. I would have to seek them out...

The Lord of the Bone-Men, bound to Voldemort's power, roared a cry of thunderous insolence and surged towards me across the sky. My entire ship shook, great fragments of the deck cracked away, and it was all Jason and Grace could do to keep her steady against the maw of the beast. It was time to face my enemy.

I leapt down from the control column at the aft of the ship, down onto the beaten and broken deck, past the dead cannons and the snapped

mast, running for the head of the Reminiscence, to the one and only vanguard against all that had destroyed Atlantis those many millennia ago.

As I ran, I bit down hard on my cigar, digging into my pocket for the wands I had won fair and square, through the ancient rights of wizard combat, from Kinglsey and his Aurors. The giant creature of bone, crawling across the sky, turned its massive, hideous skull to meet me. It was only fifty feet away now, its jaws stretched wide to swallow the Reminiscence whole.

"FUCK YOU!" I growled through my gritted teeth. This monster needed to fear me, like all the rest of them. In a cloud of smoke, in a haze of unchallenged defiance, I reached the bow of the ship and leapt up onto the splintered railing, howling into the defiled heavens!

I tossed the seven wands up into the air, focusing my undeniable intent upon the magic within, and took a deep, steadying breath...

Things back here... they never change at all.

All the demonic forces of Hell and Forget threatened to descend through the storm-ridden sky above London. I stood at the forefront of my battleship, that ol' shitkickin' grin on my face, and regarded the horde - that giant alien face only a few feet away - with weary indifference.

"POTTER! I will swallow your soul!"

Would you now? Would you really? Seven wands spiralled around me, cutting thin tracks of silver light in fierce, patient arcs around my body. Eight better than one... Slowly – ever so slowly – my smile paled into fated, discarded revolution.

And now behold the trembling sky, the wasted promises of futures long past, borne upon the righteous divine fury of Long Ago, and behold the last of Harry Potter, of all that I ever was, bathed in the blood of a thousand lost worlds.

I flicked the stub of my cigar over the edge of the ship into the city far below, tipped my awesome Captain's hat back on my head, and then cocked my wand as if it were a shotgun.

"Come get some."

A/N: And thus the scene is set for what I intend to be my finest ever action scene. Those who have read my other stories across the years will know I enjoy a good action scene. There will be gratuitous, completely uncalled for nudity in the next chapter. Looking forward to that!

And it may very well be the last chapter of Wastelands of Time. Oh yes, oh yes. There shall be an epilogue, though, which will pave the way for the sequel. Keep an eye out for Chapter 28 – Lonely Tonight, Lonely Tomorrow, as soon as its written. Good job on the reviews for the last chapter, too, you folks did great.

Thanks for reading, please review,

-Cap'n Joe

PS: A firm handshake to any movie buffs that picked up the homage in the last few paragraphs to the greatest movie of all time.

Chapter 28 – Lonely Tonight, Lonely Tomorrow

And nothing ever happens,
Nothing happens at all.
The needle returns to the start of the song
and we all sing along like before...

~Del Amitri

"I AM HARRY POTTER – THE LAST LORD OF ATLANTIS! FOR THE CRIME OF INVADING THIS UNITED KINGDOM, I CONDEMN YOU ALL TO DEATH!"

Bold words. Yet I had the stones and the resolve to back them up. Atlantis was mine. Had been mine. Mine to destroy, at least. On my authority – and there was no higher in this or any world.

With seven wands swirling around me and thrumming with devastating potential, and my own clenched in my fist to make eight, I stepped off the railed decking of the Reminiscence and out into the air – flying once more on the wings of my intent. I cast a quick sticking charm on my awesome hat so I didn't lose it in the fight to come.

Before me was a creature that's sheer size was mind-boggling. It dwarfed me against the sky, and if not for the fierce blizzard absorbing all light over London, its shadow would've plunged the city into terrible darkness.

The magic coursing through me was doing several things, the least of all allowing me to fly. My storm raged with ever-increasing ferocity and the pulses of desired suggestion I'd cast over London forced the Muggles to duck and run, to avert their gaze away from the sky. It wasn't enough – there was never enough – and innocent people were about to die.

"ATLANTIS BURNS!" the Lord of the Shambling Bone-Men roared, its giant maw stretched as wide as Hogwarts was tall. Its breath – a cold, death-riddled wash of foul air – threatened to dissolve me.

I laughed at the sky, lightning forked across the world, tearing through snow and glancing off the corrupted bone as I took flight and the Reminiscence fell away behind me. The creature's mouth snapped shut fast, but I was faster, as light began to stream from my collected wands.

Curses of destructive nonsense. Magic of long forgotten chaos. I knew it all – was it all. Such power inside of me, along the flow of understanding stolen from the Infernal Clock and the many lives I had lived and died and lived and died and lived and di—I was a conduit for all the Harry Potters that had ever sought to stand against the nightmare.

I was the sum of all that I had ever been. The final equaliser, borne now under a darkened sky, alight with the curse fires of the world gone mad!

It all flowed through my mind. Magic I had long forgotten came back to me, pathways of understanding were ajar and devastation was released. There were explosive powers akin to nuclear weapons locked away inside my head, and the Infernal Clock had given me the launch codes.

I laughed.

Terrible light scored the length of the mammoth beast, digging long irreparable gouges into the thing's skeletal hide. Fire that began to eat.

I laughed, my voice still magnified, still an echoing boom across the ruined heavens!

London trembled beneath me, as did the Lord of the Bone-Men, the pair of us crawling across the sky. My wands spun faster now, flickering and spiralling around me in patterns faster than the eye could follow. Magic flowed in a rainbow of colour and an orchestra of pure sound, sinking its fangs into the bone that stretched and sizzled.

And I laughed because I no longer knew how to cry. Sleet and snow lashed the glasses from my face, but I was seeing with another sense

entirely now. A deep sense of Long Ago, of the Dreams Before. I had fought this fight so many times and I knew, even as the rest of the demonic horde descended upon their wounded master, and Voldemort sought to blast me out of the sky, I knew what I was doing.

I was fighting a war.

A war of my own making – a war only I knew how to fight. A war I always lost, in the end, but what else was I going to do with eternity? An eternity I no longer had...

I sent liquid flame, brighter than the sun and as hot as hell, surging into the gouges cut along the length and breadth of the enormous Bone-Man. The thing was screaming beneath my feet, roiling in the sky. Its entire bulk moved to crush me, but I was fast – too fast – and baby, I'd been here before.

Smaller creatures of the kind I had defeated beneath Rome, in Fleur's garden, and many lives before, attacked en masse. Razor-sharp claws slashed through the air, cutting into one another and missing me entirely. I moved the stolen wands around my form and great silver swords of light erupted from the tips.

Half a dozen magical blades sprang to life around me and began to cut.

And set bone aflame.

My chest burnt, as well, with an entirely different fire. One of Infernal making, upon the hands of a broken Clock.

Time slowed for the rest of the world, much as it had done against the Aurors, and my lightning blades cut a swath through the Bone-Men surrounding me in the storm-addled sky.

Great chunks of fiery bone began to rain down upon the city below. London would soon start to burn. Burn, baby, burn! Nothing to be done about that, save the snow in my storm would help minimise the damage and fight the fires.

"Know when to fold 'em, motherfuckers!" I roared.

I was one against an army, one against the impossible remnants of the Old World. A ten thousand quid bottle of scotch was the least I deserved for my efforts. I deserved a fucking parade for my effort—

A beam of crimson curse light blasted through my defences, shattering them like thin glass cast against stone. It was magic moving as fast as I was, as deadly as I was...

I raised my arm on pure instinct alone to absorb the unseen blow, to protect my beautiful face.

The curse severed my left hand just below the wrist.

Sliced it clean through – a dark cutting curse, then – and the remnants drew a quick line of blood against my neck. Along the very same thin white scar that Voldemort had given me upon cutting my throat in Atlantis some days or months or years ago. That had been this life, hadn't it?

"POTTER!"

And speak of the devil, descending on black clouds of malice and hate... the Dark Lord Voldemort, his wand forever raised against mine.

A spurt of precious blood exploded from my fresh stump of a hand, followed by white-hot... nothing. A cold numbness. I ignored it and shoved my stump into the light of the silver blades surrounding me. Ever practical, tempered through long experience, the heat and flame of the magic fused the wound closed, saved my life, cauterised the injury.

There was no pain. It was simply too hot. The nerves were seared away before I could feel a thing. Pain would come later. Shock, as well, if I had been any other man. But I wasn't. And I had lost more than a hand before.

Lightning flashed and I caught a glimpse of my severed limb falling so slowly away into a swirl of cold snow and sleet, never to be seen again...

I accepted it in my stride, already veering away from the monstrous burning creature beneath me, up again into the sky and out of the path of Voldemort's next curse. A familiar emerald green burst of death.

I adapted to the loss – at least it had been my already diminished left hand and not my wand-arm – and forced an array of new defences into existence against Voldemort, sacrificing half of the silver light blades that were still slicing the slow motion Bone-Men asunder.

Only Voldemort wasn't moving in slow motion.

And why didn't that surprise me? We were equals in all things, it seemed.

His magic, his will and resolve, was just as heightened as mine by the shard of eternity digging its way toward my heart. I reckoned whatever force the shard was emitting that slowed the world down around me did not affect the Dark Lord.

Pity, that, but then this game was never fair. Or perhaps it was too fair.

No matter. Maybe yes, maybe no, you can't change the fuckin' weather or regrow a lost hand.

"You burn Atlantis! You burn my army!" Voldemort's voice was pure rage and violence. "YOU DARE FOLLOW ME BACK! POTTER!"

The Lord of the Bone-Men was screaming and dying beneath us as we circled one another under the torn sky. Only it wasn't torn anymore. The horde of demonic terror had crossed over and the void to Atlantis had closed forever. The city was no more. All that remained now was what the Dark Lord and I had brought back with us.

And I had set most of that on fire.

The sound that reached my ears was muffled and sluggish. The snowflakes fell around us in what appeared to be gentle, aching slow waves, and I flew through it, leaving a track in my wake, as the Bone-Men tried to keep up, but they were moving through water... and my blades did the rest.

Only Voldemort was unaffected. His words reached me loud and clear.

"You owe me one hand, asshole," I said into the abyss.

"I'll take your head!"

We fought.

We fought as we had fought so many times before.

Arcs of curse light swam across the sky. I used my arsenal of wands against the Dark Lord, yet he was quick – very quick – and had me on the defence, as well. Eight wands against one and I still couldn't best the son of a bitch. Not like this, anyway.

I had a theory that the torn and ragged piece of shit Voldemort called a soul afforded him a greater understanding of the dark knowledge we had gained within the Infernal Clock. Despite all my lives, all my collective knowledge, Voldemort simply understood, and would always understand, magic better than I could.

I was also battling an army of nightmare-demons from Hell at the same time, which while not overly taxing, did prove a distraction.

We cast non-verbal spells across the sky, an array of devastating magic that slammed against invisible shields, burst through the blizzard against a backdrop of clear blue lightning, and forced us further across the back of the beast below.

The world shook not with thunder but with the reverberating echoes of the sheer power we were flinging around.

"Atlantis has served you well, Potter!" the Dark Lord cried – every word a fierce curse.

"Just like your mother served me—"

"AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Flakes of cold snow had settled on Voldemort's dark robes, across his bald, pale head. The fire in his eyes was death incarnate. I was not afraid, never afraid, but I was tested.

And not to be found wanting, I fought with all the vengeance known to my time-blasted soul.

I threw myself at the Dark Lord, casting magic of such sheer destruction that the Bone-Men still clawing at my broken form were fused and melted by their proximity to the spell work. Voldemort's robes tore, as did my suit. I could feel my skin stretching, little breaks in the flesh in the webbing between my fingers, and warm blood beginning to flow.

My eyes were bleeding.

My ears...

I was screaming! Rage and defiance and ice and nightmare!

Tears appeared across Voldemort's flesh – only he did not bleed. The bastard was not human enough for that. Fuckin' horcruxes.

We were mere feet apart, identical snarls of raw hate on our faces, and caught between us was an invisible sphere of magical energy – a swirling vortex of power created from the spells we had cast between us. Neither of us gave an inch, yet it was impossible to move closer... we were two opposing magnetic forces.

"BAH!" I cried out in frustration and broke the connection. The magic slipped, erupted outwards, and we were both flung back along the length of the atrocious creature beneath us, spinning through the air.

The flames had consumed most of its form now, spreading swiftly and eating into the yellow bone. It was breaking apart – no match for my considerable wizard balls – into fiery missiles destined to pulverise London.

I felt a piercing pain in my chest and time sped back up. The remaining demonic soldiers, only a few dozen now, renewed their assault against me. My three silver blades became six again as I fought them off and surged back through the sky, away from Voldemort.

My scar was burning, but if history held its course, as it most often did, then he was running, as well. Running away from me and toward another goal.

Toward a castle far to the north. A castle I called home.

The Lord of the Bone-Men was ripped to shreds, screaming and wailing and finally dying under my fires, and its skeletal children quickly followed. I had bested the Dark Lord's broken army, choked it to death on enough liquid flame to torch the whole world.

They all died screaming. And I, bloodied, one hand lost for my trouble, hovered laughing within the chaos as great swaths of London were poised and threatened to burn under the same flame. As people began to die. People that had died so many times before.

Shining in the distance I glimpsed my awesome battleship.

The Reminiscence sought me out within the maelstrom and I descended toward her with my awesome captain's cap still stuck to my head.

And the best you can hope for, Harry, is to die in your sleep...

I landed on the deck of the Reminiscence with a bit of a stumble, coughing on smoke and swaying from fatigue, loss and all manner of the wearied resolve caught in between one moment and the next.

Tonks ran down the length of the ship to meet me, her eyes determined and her hair a rainbow of dark, intense colour. She had seen some of the fight, it seemed, and her gaze scanned me for injury as she approached, her wand held aloft and at the ready.

"Harry!" She pulled up short, raising a hand to her gorgeous lips. "Your hand is gone."

I glanced down at my burnt stump. There was a sick smell of roasted pork wafting on the air, and thin tendrils of white smoke rose from the wound. "Yeah, there goes my sex life. Heh." I sighed. "Oh that made me sad..."

"Let me heal the burns—"

"No time!" I ran past the Auror, most likely ex-Auror, and ascended to the bridge of the ship. Jason and Grace were doing their best to keep the ship steady, straining against the control column as the storm raged about us and the army of the Bone-Men plummeted down through the sky – on fire. "Fly us under the bulk of that son of a bitch."

"What!" Jason looked at me as if I were insane. "You're insane," he said, settling the matter.

The Lord of the Bone-Men had been twisted and the fire had broken it apart into several dozen chunks roughly the size of battleships. Even one of those would cause widespread devastation to the city below. The lives lost would be, if not millions, then hundreds of thousands. I had to stop some of the madness.

"Of course I am. Insanely awesome." I tipped the cap back on my head and gave the Muggle professor a wink. "Fly under it, Jason, we have to dust as much as we can. Fly!"

"Damn it, Potter!"

We flew.

Acting on what had to be instinct alone, Jason plunged the Reminiscence down through the sky at speeds fast enough to have us all holding on lest we were blown away. Tonks crouched down next to me, holding my ruined and numb left arm, as I used the seven stolen wands whipping about my body to buffet us all against the wind and the storm.

I was laughing again – laughin' and smokin', boss, yeehaw! I was beginning to notice I had a real problem containing the insane cackles. Oh well.

We caught the sky beneath the mammoth chunks of desecrated bone. If not for the fire tearing through the skeletal remains we would have been plunged into total darkness halfway between London and my blizzard. I sent three of my wands pointing skywards, sketching quick and vicious Atlantean runes in the air, as fast as I could manage them.

A trail of glowing silver runes was left in the wake of the Reminiscence, a trail of intent and purpose, once more, on the edge of my higher, infernal understanding. Cords of thick golden light erupted from the runes, dozens upon dozens shining like rays of sunlight, turning the dark sky bright.

The cords of shining power swayed back and forth like heavy spotlights. As the falling pieces of the Bone-Man carcass fell into range the golden light scoured the bone into dust. It dissolved the chunks of falling devastation, ate the potential catastrophe about to befall London.

We reached the end of the creature and I cried, "SWING AROUND!" at Jason, but he didn't need telling. Having mastered the rather simple controls, he swung the Reminiscence around on a sickle and dived lower, below the matrix of corded rune-light I'd strung across the sky, and set about back the way we had come.

I cast more runes as fast as I could, larger runes. Flaming pieces of bone slammed into the deck all around us and I sacrificed another of my eight wands to deflecting the shrapnel and intended carnage. It

wasn't enough. My ship was once again aflame as heavy slabs of dying bone tore into her.

Tonks, shielded as best I could next to me, cast jets of icy water at the flames roaring across the lower deck, trying to keep the ship afloat by drowning it.

"I LOVE YOU!" I shouted above the maelstrom.

Tonks snapped her head around to look at me. "You... WHAT WAS THAT?"

I winked. "I SAID 'ABOVE YOU'!"

Tonks looked up in time to see one of my wands deflect a large, jagged bony knuckle from the beast away from us and into one of the defunct cannons lining the port and starboard flanks of the ship. It struck with the force of all hell unleashed, tearing the cannon and a good portion of the main deck away.

Jason couldn't control us against the impact and we began to spin out of control, travelling fast and hard once more down toward London.

That was us done, then.

I leapt up, pulling Tonks with me and casting spells as quick as I could to fly us up to the bridge. We landed behind Jason and Grace – she was clinging to his waist with one hand and trying to right our balance with the other, pushing desperately against a dead crystal column.

I buffeted us all against the wind and the storm, sealing us within a bubble of protective magic and stepped in to seize the main controls from Jason. He gladly let it go. The silver-white light and the Atlantean runes were flickering and dying all across the wheel. We were bruised and bleeding, leaking vital fluid, it seemed.

And running out of time.

If we hit London at this speed – at any speed, really – the starlight in the core of the ship would ignite and wipe out a fair amount of the old town. But the controls were not responding, and I had only one good hand to thump them with!

"Ladies and gentlemen, time, please!" I cried. We needed more time.

The sliver of eternity in my chest seemed to hear that thought as it burrowed ever closer toward my heart. I winced, half-expected all the world to slow down again, but it did not. That would have been a boon in my favour, and those just never fucking happened.

"Of freedom and of pleasure'," I sang, forcing the control column against the spin and freefall. "Nothing ever lasts forever... na...na...na" Easy, easy. "Everybody wants to rule the world... Jason, lend me a hand, if you please, I'm one short! Ha!"

The Muggle professor pushed in against me and took over forcing the pitch crystal back while I gave a good kick to the whole damn column. "COME ON, YOU OLD WHORE!"

The console flared back to life under my tender care – yes! – before going as dead as a rock.

"Shit!"

Behind us we had done all we could for London, given the circumstances. My runes had annihilated most of the remains of the demon army to dust and less than dust, but large chunks and smaller, fiercer pieces of bone still rained down upon the city with all the fury of the Old World.

London began to burn as we fell like deadweight above the outskirts of the metro area, over what looked like Wimbledon Common.

"What now, Harry?" Grace asked. The world was strangely silent inside our bubble of shielding magic, and Grace's question sounded far too calm.

I laughed again. "Twist and shout, lady!"

I keyed the ignition, primed the lines, reset the shiny otherworld crystals, crystals from a time before the birth of the world and magic we knew today, and hoped to all hell that—

"Life! I give you life!" I screamed and thrust my fists... fist and stump... against the cold panels.

Hot silver light flooded into the crystal podiums and the ship thrummed heavy beneath our feet! The light was bright, ever so bright, and power returned for what may have been the final time, given the trampled condition of my still-proud ship.

"Jason!"

He pushed hard on the balance crystal and I spun the ship against the fall and the wind and my mighty storm. The Reminiscence buckled and I could hear the hull screaming against the turbulence as it was torn asunder.

Splinters of wood and reinforced mythril panelling fell away but our fatal descent became a lot less fatal and, about a quarter mile above the heavily populated areas below, I righted the ship and took off north.

Tonks collapsed against me, breathing a heavy sigh of relief and Jason held onto Grace, as pale as a ghost. I put on my grim, determined look, offset a little by the awesome hat still stuck to my head, and steered us out from under the storm and back into daylight, bleeding the engines now for all they were worth.

No rest for the wicked, even if we were beaten and on fire, and no time to assess the damage to London. My scar was a hot knife of pain etching that cursed lightning bolt into my very skull. Voldemort was taking his newfound strength against Dumbledore, against Hogwarts.

I had a bit of a problem with that.

Time ticking away, Harry. Take a moment. Have a break and sit back... admire the chaos of the worlds you have unmade.

You're in ruins, my boy.

I gave the control column back to Jason somewhere just north of Birmingham, as I wasn't feeling too well.

"Harry?" Tonks said, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I shook my head and waved her away, stumbling over to the edge of the ship and throwing up a mix of beer and minestrone soup. I retched once, twice, and drove the spike of the Infernal Clock in my chest another step closer to my heart.

The pain was blinding and I screamed. "FUCK!"

With my bloodied yet whole right hand I thrust two fingers into the agonizing wound in my shoulder, two knuckles deep, tearing at the shard, desperately trying to yank the son of a bit—

I actually went blind for a moment with the pain this time, my legs collapsing beneath me, laughing so hard it was more like sobbing as I hit the scorched deck. Hey Jude, don't let me down...

I allowed myself half a minute to blink away the tears and think of nothing but a sweet, sweet demise, alongside deep steadying breaths of endless life. Then Tonks was there, pulling my fingers out of my shoulder as gently as she could. The pain was there, but it was distant and pointless, and I ignored it.

"Merlin, Harry," Tonks whispered, as Jason and Grace flew the battleship and gave us a moment. "You're a mess, kid."

"Tonks...?"

"Yes, Harry. I'm here." She was waving her wand up and down my form. A soft, familiar pink light settled over the dozens of cuts and

bruises, along the burnt tissue surrounding my stump of a hand and arm. Cool, healing light. It did nothing for the shoulder wound, but then neither of us had expected it would.

I was magic beyond mere magic now.

"We've all been here before," I muttered, mindlessly stroking a loose strand of Tonks' cerulean hair back behind her ear. I ran my fingers down the back of her ear – I remember she liked that.

I felt her shiver. "Harry, stop that, I'm trying to fix you." She swatted my solitary hand away and I let it fall with a dull thud against the deck.

"You're always trying to fix me, but I work better broken, sweetheart." I was falling asleep. How long have I been awake? I could hear a gentle ticking sound. "Do you hear that?"

"What?" Tonks asked, casting quick looks around for any trouble.

"Tick... tick... tick..." I frowned. "Time. That bitch is around here somewhere."

Tonks pressed her hand to my forehead. "Merlin, you're burning up, Harry. We've got to get you to a proper Healer. Ahh!" She whipped her hand away and pressed it against her own forehead. "Holy shit! What the hell was that?"

"Voldemort," I muttered. "Don't touch the scar, never the scar, Tonks. It is always burning."

"But I saw..." She shook her head. "I felt him. God, Harry, is that what you feel all the time?"

I was shaking my head, trying to stop the ticking. It was maddening. Tick... tick... tick... A thought occurred to me.

I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out the dull gold watch Father Time had given to me in a world that now felt like a dream. When this watch strikes four minutes to twelve – midnight in the minds of insanity, Harry – you will have failed for the last time and be

lost to an eternity of near-death upon the grinding gears of the Infernal Clock. This I foresee.

It wasn't keeping true time, of that I was sure. According to the cursed watch, it was five minutes past ten. A little under two hours before I died, but two hours according to whose measure of time? Right now, in the real world, it was mid afternoon. I glanced up at the sun. Thirteen minutes to four, said the clock in my head.

Ah, to hell with it. I needed to deal with my burnt stump of a hand. I put the watch away and the ticking stopped echoing through my mind. It was with a heroic, godly effort that I shrugged away my mounting fatigue and gained my feet.

The world swayed for a moment on my overcooked and wrecked battleship. "Like the worst hangover of all time," I mumbled, but managed to stay standing. It was always a near thing. I could have slept for a lifetime, right then.

But time – there was very little of it left. These were the closing scenes of Act I, of the long, timeless summer before school was back in session.

"Thanks, Tonks," I said. I felt better for being sick, and for the healing. "Now let's get to Hogwarts."

"It's going to take an hour or more at this rate," she said. "Why don't we Apparate to Hogsmeade?"

"Because I don't want to give the game away too early. Also I need half an hour to fashion myself a new hand."

"Well I should go ahead and warn Dumbledore—"

"He is already well aware and we'll be seeing him soon. Just help me down these steps, would you. I don't wanna fall on my ass and look all stupid."

"Oh Merlin forbid," Tonks muttered, but she did help me. I must've looked like I needed it. "You're overdoing it, Harry. You're going to kill yourself."

"Most likely," I agreed. "Hopefully, even, when all things come to an end. But that's what I get for plotting the necessary annihilation of dominant tyrannical paradigms."

So the deck of the ship was a splintered and scorched ruin, much like my good self. My smouldering stump was a lot less smoky and a lot more painful now. It was time to manufacture a new hand. A sturdier, much more manly hand forged in the elements of a lost world.

Maybe I'd fashion myself a hook instead of a hand. That'd be swashbucklingly awesome. I had the ship and the hat, after all, and could quite easily acquire a parrot...

"You're breathing pretty hard, Harry. Is it the pain?"

Tonks set me down on the deck against the armoury, near the cabin into the lower reaches of the ship. There was a comfy bed down there; a bed Fleur and I had shared, as well as an expanded treasury full of our spoils from Atlantis. Gold and mythrill bricks and ancient tomes...

"I always feel just about a heartbeat away from bursting into tears, Tonks, but never from the pain."

"Then what? Isn't it about time you came clean with me? I think I've earned some sort of explanation for everything that has happened since you gave me the slip back at Privet Drive." She shook me by the shoulders, as I was fading fast – to sleep, or mayhap unconsciousness, again. "Harry, I think I've earned your trust."

"You earned that a long time ago, my dear," I whispered. "But if I told you the truth of the matter, the heart of the whole damn sordid affair, then you would leave. Just like Fleur."

"Well, then you've got a problem, Harry, because I'm this close to leaving anyway. You can talk about trust and faith all you want, but at some point that has to become more. Don't you see that?"

Of course I did. I saw more than anyone – lived more than anyone. My heart was beating so fast. The crystal shard, the petal of eternity, the fucked up infinity fractal buried in my chest was only a single push away from piercing what remained of an old, ruined soul.

"Okay," I said. "But don't say I didn't warn you. Let me do something about my hand first, please, and then I'll tell you how I've done what I've done – why London is burning, why Atlantis is ash... all those 'whys' and 'what the fucks' in their drunken glory, Tonks, if that's what you want."

"It is."

I nodded. "Then do me a favour and go grab one of those bricks of mythrill from down below. I have a cunning plan."

"So far your cunning plans haven't been so cunning."

"What I lack in subtlety I make up for in badass explosions. Please go get that brick."

"Alright."

Tonks disappeared down below, into the no doubt broken and dilapidated interior of the Reminiscence. From my pocket I withdrew my own wand, one amongst the seven stolen sticks and began to sketch sharp, crimson runes into the deck at my side.

"Aleous... neratu... sanctensee..." I muttered old words, old spells, old things learnt in Atlantis a long, long time ago. More memories came to me now, more than ever before. It was the piece of the Infernal Clock in my chest, uncovering lost secrets, laying bare the tormented wastelands of time. Oh, Time... Tears that would never fall.

By the time Tonks returned I'd sketched a merry band of softly glowing runes into the space around me, collapsed up against the

armoury – my back against the wall – and I accepted the brick of raw mythril with my good hand carefully, and placed it in the centre of one of the runes.

"What is this?" Tonks asked.

"I'm going to fashion a new hand out of this here mythril." It was magic similar to the silver hand Voldemort had bestowed upon Wormtail in that blasted graveyard. Oh if I could go back in time to that moment... I would never have failed. "You see, mythril is unbreakable, Tonks, once its fired and tempered with magic. This is the raw stuff – see how it's murky-purple and yet translucent? Yeah, I'll be able to crush steel with this thing."

"That sounds... lovely." Tonks was unnerved.

I laughed. "These runes will also impart a touch of transfiguration magic into the mix. This one, and this one. You ever see that Muggle film about a time-travelling robot that can change its form? The Terminator?"

Tonks nodded. "My dad loves those movies."

"Yeah, me too. My new hand will be kind of like that." I sighed. "But it'll also just be a hand – a shiny, metal hand – but I can wear a glove and pass for normal."

Tonks was silent for a moment, her violet hair blowing about her face in the cool breeze high above the green fields of England. The day was descending toward twilight, toward darkness. "I don't doubt you can do it, Harry, but it sounds dangerous."

I shrugged. "I just had my hand blown off in a duel with Voldemort in the flaming, snowy skies above London, amidst the fiery ruins of a demonic, skeletal army that was blasted into this world on the remnants of another. I'd say we're a little past 'dangerous'."

Tonks actually smiled. "Yeah, me too. But once you're done, you owe me some answers."

"A promise is a promise... is a promise," I said, frowning at the thought. "Anyway, stand back, I'm about to do magic."

Magic which was very uneventful, all things considered. I rested my burnt, nasty stump against the block of raw mythrill and began whispering dated incantations and archaic spells. The magic flowed through me, through my mind, like water through a sieve, if the cliché can be forgiven, and it took no real effort to fashion my Terminator-hand.

Silver fires flared from the runes scattered about me on the deck of the Reminiscence and the runes began to spin, faster and faster, shooting sparks of hot light into the air. Harmless sparks, timid sparks, yet powerful sparks. The runes spun and converged upon the mythrill brick, dissolving the raw material, an element of Long Ago, and fusing it to my nerveless stump.

There was very little pain. Very little sensation. And when the fires died away I raised my shining hand before me, resplendent in the late afternoon light, and polished to perfection.

It was amazing – it was triumphant! I felt a flood of new life rush through my veins, a deluge of surging strength and might! Here I was, whole again, with the hand of God himself—

"Er... Harry," Tonks said. "You've got six fingers."

"What?" I looked again at my shiny new extremity, admired the magic and the craftsmanship as the runes of Atlantis faded all around me, the mythrill brick fully absorbed, leaving nothing but scorched ash upon the deck. There was the thumb, sure, and counting from right to left... one... two... three...

Tonks snorted. "I count six fingers there, Merlin."

"Ah, fuck."

Was there a sweetheart at home?

"Easy fix," I muttered, concentrating on the extra digit in my new hand. The mythrill shimmered like a pebble cast on calm waters, and the additional finger was absorbed back into the whole. "See, just like the Terminator. Quit smirking."

"Very impressive, Harry, now how did you know how to do it?"

I sighed. "Not letting that go then?" I offered her my shiny metal hand and she accepted it carefully, as if it may fall to pieces, and helped me to my feet. The fusion to my flesh was flawless – there was no sensation in the actual hand, but my arm felt complete. "Well, I knew how to do it... because I've had to do it before."

Tonks stared, uncomprehending. The wind ruffled the tattered remnants of my suit around me – everything about the world was burnt or burning. Everything except Tonks. She looked great in the half-light.

"You've done it before?" She looked me up and down, biting her tongue. "Don't tell me you're hiding another metal appendage under that fancy ruined suit?"

I snorted. "No." Tick... tock. Time, Harry James Potter, yes, yes. I shook my head. "Whoa, did you just hear that?"

Tonks shrugged, looked around. "Hear what?"

I delved into my pocket and grasped the golden pocket watch. Tick... tock... What time was it? What time was it, hmm? Midnight in the minds of madness? Four minutes to or four minutes past?

"Harry, what—"

It was exactly 11:55. Oh, oh shit. "Jason!"

I moved faster than I had in the last half hour. Raw panic, something I hadn't felt in some time, flooded my system. I felt an intense pain in my chest. The shard was moving... moving the final scant distance into my heart.

The sun was in my eyes, setting over the west coast of the United Kingdom, and we were just below the azure clouds as I hurled myself up to the bridge of the Reminiscence and into what was the last minute of my existence, if Gods and darkened destiny were to be believed.

Grace was gone.

Jason was still there, still manning the control column.

In fact, he couldn't do anything less. A long, obsidian blade, a sword akin to the long minute hand of a clock, had been thrust through his back and into the Atlantean crystal – piercing his flesh and pinning him to the reins of the ship.

Oh... Time.

There was not much left in this or any reality that could shock me. But the sight of my old friend, the fiercely intelligent Muggle professor Jason Arnair, impaled against my battleship did make me sway...

Blind fury descended like a dark mask – and it was a cold, patient fury. I barely heard Tonks' cry of anguish as she pushed past me to Jason's aid. But he was beyond aid, beyond any—

"Harry, help me! He's still breathing!"

I blinked and started to move. Surely not... I ran over to the other side of the crystal column and Jason blinked up at me, seeing but not seeing. He was alive, bloodied and dying, but alive.

Tonks was casting quick spells across his slumped form. The sword was well and truly cutting him in half, but it didn't look like it had pierced his heart. Tick... tock... I still had the pocket watch clutched in my hand. The pain in my own chest was getting hotter and hotter. Time, time, time – never enough fucking time!

"Who did this! Where's Grace?" Tonks was near hysterical – or perhaps just gripped by a fury similar to mine, but a touch more heated. Fury that could end worlds.

"I... I don't..." I held a hand over my chest, my shining mythrill limb, and felt each desperate beat. I could barely breath through the pain, through the surmounting nightmares on all sides. I chanced a glance at the stopwatch at the very second the minute hand moved from 11:55 and one minute closer to midnight.

Time stopped.

So did my heart as the white rose petal of Time punctured it.

Everything went silent. I dropped the pocket watch. It slipped from my hand in achingly slow motion, and shattered against the splintered decking at my feet.

And then Chronos was there.

Standing before me, as everything else moved in that terribly slow way. Tonks was holding Jason's head, whispering sweet lies into his ear, and I could almost make out the words as his death was drawn out in those fragile, endless moments between one second and the next.

"You can't change the weather, Harry James Potter," Chronos said, looking for all the world like one of my classmates. Barely sixteen and yet ancient, dressed in a fine suit, shooting me a confident grin. "Maybe yes..."

I licked my lips. "...and maybe no."

Chronos dashed forward and closed his hand around my throat—I can't touch you now, Harry Potter, not for more than a second. The consequences of our coming into physical contact would be... This world has grown on me. I'd hate to see it end in fire once more—and squeezed. His eyes held the fire of burning realities, of time gone mad, his grin turned feral, fierce, and he thrust his face into mine.

"Wait..." I gasped.

"Waiting's done," he growled. "It is time for you to remember!"

"What?"

"All for this, Harry! Everything for this moment! Wake up! Wake from the Dream! REMEMBER!"

My endless headache rose on a wave of pure, raw pain – a rising crescendo of impossible sensation, and I was dead. Time, Father Time, had been right. My heart had stopped beating four minutes to midnight in some alien time flow. Insanity would beget chaos... would all be undone by the unmaking of the world as my soul was thrust back in time—

"REMEMBER!"

Who are you?

—Time.—

Oh...

—Just who were you expecting?—

I do not know... but Time's up, isn't it?

—Yes, yes it is, Harry James Potter. And this is really, really going to hurt...—

Fuck it, DO YOUR WORST!

"Her name?" I asked the voice that was only the madness in my mind. Batshit-insane and feelin' fine, that was me. SO BE IT! "She was a muggle and she loved me."

Tessa.

"Tessa," I whispered. Darkness descended. "Oh yeah..."

I met her after running away.

Chronos choked the life from me. "Do you remember yet? No? Time to wake up, Harry James Potter – time to face the truth of all that you are! All that you have ever been! REMEMBER!"

And as the shard of the Infernal Clock settled inside my heart, I did. God save me, the Devil take me, Magic forsake me... I remembered.

Life earlier than life flickers before my eyes. Time spent upon golden coasts, under the ruling madness of infinity gone mad.

I remember.

"Better to have died, Harry. Better to have died and forsaken the ruined earth to Voldemort all those lives ago."

It wasn't just the highlights set to repeat – this was the full playback. Every minute, every blasted second. I lived it all on rewind; saw it all through a haze of blind insanity. True insanity. The kind you can't walk away from. The kind that haunts.

I remembered more than I ever had before – more than I could have ever remembered, given a million lives and painless time-travel. It was all there, all in my head, never truly forgotten... merely festering below the surface of my waking mind.

There was magic there, magic I knew and had forgotten. But there was also death – endless death. Not just my own, but of those I cared about in my own fucked-up way. Fleur and Tonks featured heavily, committing all the old sins in new and exciting ways.

"What's your name?"

"Potter, Harry J. We should get a beer sometime."

"Hey, that sounds pretty good."

Fleur gone. Jason dying. Grace missing in action. Tonks losing faith. What did I have left? This thrice-damned world I'd just have to watch end in fire? Again and again and so many times? Why bother? Why lift one finger, mythrill or otherwise, to try and make a difference this last time?

Because it is the last time, whispered my fragmented sanity. And because Tessa loves this world, you selfish asshole. Tessa. She sees hope where you see fire.

Oh, Merlin, why do I keep finding reasons to go on?

There was no one steering the Reminiscence. We were cruising through the sky high above England, veering northwest toward the dark seas. Her latest pilot was skewered to the control platform, dead or close enough to make no difference.

Chronos was crushing my windpipe.

But that didn't matter.

Because I had remembered.

I had remembered it all. Every moment. Every life since the first. What had that old bearded son of a bitch said back in the Fae and Forget?

"When your memories awaken, when the storm is unleashed... Woe be to anyone who stands in the path of Harry Potter..." No laughter now. Just a solemn nightmare-silence. "...The Sleeping God."

So we were playing at gods now, were we? Very well.

I met Chronos' gaze and the creature, whatever he or it was, let me go. I stumbled back, sucking in a harsh breath. Whatever had happened in my head to cause me to remember, some time had past, and I watch Tonks disappear – Disapparate – dragging Jason along with her.

She left a bloodied crystal column in her wake, an obsidian blade of harsh unknown metal driven right through the heart of the ship's steering wheel. Tonks was trying to save Jason – but if fate held her course of fucking me over, there would be nothing she could do. As powerful as I was, Healing magic wouldn't work for me. Never had. I didn't have that particular skill. I only destroyed. I wished them both luck.

"Is your heart still beating, Harry James Potter?"

I rested my hand of flesh and blood over my chest and felt calm, steady beats. There was pain, too, and every breath drew the shard of the Infernal Clock scraping against my heart's wall. I felt... anticipation. Something had changed. Something was still changing.

"For a wonder, it is. What did you just do?"

Chronos shook his head. "Nothing that wouldn't have happened anyway, eventually, given all the lives you've lived and all the lives you could have lived."

"No, this is the last time. I won't survive the trip back again." I laughed. "Don't you see that? Every attempt on my life is an attempt on the whole world. If I die, we all die."

"That is my doing, yes, yes. My influence. You would have continued on living life after life if I had not interfered, if we had not taken your blood back in Italy, but Harry, oh Harry Potter, you were simply taking far too fucking long to get it right."

I could taste blood – a mouthful of pennies. It hurt to draw breath through my bruised throat. The Reminiscence flew onward, straight and level yet on a slow descent. The fading sun flickered through the

purple clouds on the western horizon, the wind was a calm, patient breeze...

"You and Saturnia... made this the End Game?"

He nodded. "It had to be your doing, of course. You had to destroy the Infernal Clock by yourself."

"Why me?"

Chronos blinked. "Isn't that obvious? Harry, just who else possibly could?"

Truth enough to that, I suppose. I didn't know who he was, or how he and Saturnia had done it, but there were answers here, answers at long last... answers bleeding into yet more questions. Damn it all, I was too old for this shit. I realised with a start that I knew exactly how old I was, right down to this very moment.

Oh God, the lives burnt through my mind. No longer in drips and drabs or half-remembered battles, but in bright impossible technicolour. I had been doing this for so long.

"One more question," I said to Chronos. To the young man who was, perhaps, as ancient as I, and as dangerous. He had played a game to end the world, and now we were all anticipating something. Something on the horizon. "One more, for the road, you son of a bitch. Where is Fleur Delacour?"

Chronos' intense gaze softened. He looked almost kind and a lot less insane. "She is safe, yes, yes. Back at home with her family, trying so desperately hard to forget everything you exposed her to. But she cannot forget, not now..."

"Did you hurt her?" I asked, rather politely given the circumstances.

"No more than you did."

I would have had something to say about that, both witty and redeeming, but it was at that moment a great shockwave of unknown

origins came rolling in across the heavens and knocked the slow-falling Reminiscence from her steady path and spiralling down sideways at a terrifying, vertigo-inducing angle.

Boom!

I leapt backwards, using those brief precious moments between one second and the next, and closed my grip around the bloody sword embedded in the control column as the force of our dive took hold, and a thousand screaming harpies tore apart the cool serenity of the sky.

Given the current state of my battleship, I wouldn't have been terribly surprised if the controls were unresponsive, but luck was with me for once – or always, depending on how I looked at it – and I shifted the ship into gear and we rode the edge of the invisible explosion down through the sky.

Chronos had no problem with the altered gravity of our flight; even as we descended he remained perfectly at ease. He looked expectant, like this was what he had been waiting for. That subtle feeling of anticipation had become about as subtle as a nail driven into my skull.

"Here we go, Harry James Potter!" the demigod called. "You're all here, at last, every one of you, and it is coming back – coming to you! The Last Lord and High King of Atlantis!"

We were striding the coast, two miles over a brightly lit strip of buildings. There was a tower, strung with lights. Blackpool, I thought. Alongside the Irish Sea... What the hell was happening? The town below, bustling with early evening traffic, was darkening... fading.

In its place rose taller structures, buildings of white magnificence, scraping across the sky. A horribly familiar city was bleeding through what I could only surmise was a tear in the world, in reality itself, and it was crushing the Muggle town below.

Atlantis was rising from the ragged depths of time!

But that was impossible. I had melted the city mere hours ago.

I said as much to Chronos. "But I destroyed it not five hours ago!"

"Harry." Chronos sounded offended. "You of all people should know that you cannot destroy something inevitable."

The entire city, alive and unharmed, appeared as if from under an invisibility cloak – and crushed Blackpool beneath its weight. Great fires and tremendous explosions rocked the world below. The roads and structures were torn asunder; the entire earth shook and splintered.

An impossible wave of chaos and destruction, screeching loud enough to wake the dead, crippled the seaside town.

Half the city materialised out into the ocean and cool waters flooded in between the shining silver towers and long, mythrill-strewn streets. I could barely process what I was seeing, but given my unique vantage point and association with the absurd, I had to act fast.

With the ship levelled and set to hover in the sky, the initial shockwave over, I reached for my wand and began scratching runes in the air – magic as old, or as new now, as the fabled lost city below. I didn't know how this was possible. Atlantis was gone, dead, buried for the last time, and yet...

It was here. Now. Tens of thousands of innocent souls had just been crushed beneath its weight.

"Your move, Harry James Potter!" Chronos called above the chaos. "Look at it – sparkling in the twilight! This is no ruin, this is the might of the Old World, borne upon the folly of the New. Your move, Potter, your motherfucking move!"

Magic burst from my wand and split in the air, multiplied, like jets of streaming energy cascading over a waterfall of pure intent. Silver sparks of intricately designed runes flickered out into the world, surrounded the city below. I could see people down there, walking the streets of Atlantis...

And Chronos was right. The city wasn't a ruin. It was half drowned in the Irish Sea, and buckling under the ruins of Blackpool below, but it wasn't the dark, ash-covered mess I'd annihilated just that afternoon. It looked alive.

"Time," I whispered. "I need time."

The magic I'd cast rained down upon the city and a great, wide sheet of liquid green light began to form in the air and along the ground surrounding the outer areas of Atlantis. I let the magic flow free through my unencumbered mind, through the clear pathways of endless life... I let it grow, change, adapt.

A massive dome, several miles across and two miles wide, faded into existence around the Lost City of Atlantis. An impenetrable dome of emerald green light, pale yet deadly. Not a soul. Not a single soul would be able to pass either way through the barrier without being killed.

I was risking innocent life, but then the authority was mine. Atlantis was mine! TIME WAS MINE!

"That is an impressive piece of magic," Chronos said, coming to stand alongside me and admiring the city through the vast dome. "You included a time dilation field, yes, yes."

I took a deep breath and let it out slow, feeling every one of my years like a world upon my shoulders. "One second under that dome is one year outside of it."

"You saw them, didn't you? The Atlanteans? They came back with the city. At least now you've given yourself time to deal with them."

"This is impossible," I said, but my heart wasn't in it. My heart was aching, the shard embedded there fiercely hot. Had I done this? Had destroying the Infernal Clock deep beneath the old ruins of Atlantis, in worlds of Forget, somehow unanchored the city in time? In true time?

"Think on what you have done this day alone, Harry James Potter," Chronos whispered, and he sounded strangely pitying. "The battles,

the magic... Ancient cities, mighty Atlantis, spheres and portals ignited with dark light, skies of burning snow and screaming across the void between worlds in an archaic battleship. You think this, of all things, impossible? Is it because it is new to you? New to the Sleeping God, the weary time-traveller? You're a fool!"

"AH!" I threw the first punch, not holding back, and my metal fist closed Chronos' right eye for him. Stuck it shut good.

Chronos spun away, reeling back from the blow, and came up laughing and bleeding. "Oh, very good. You're angry enough to actually hurt me, old man. What? No magic?"

"I'm going to beat you to death," I decided, slipping my wand away and clenching my fists. "And I'm going to enjoy it."

"Don't you have a war to fight?"

"Voldemort will keep. This is me and you, at the end, in a bloody fist fight two miles above the earth in a crumbling battleship."

I lunged at the abomination before me and slammed my fist into his gut. Chronos grunted and smacked me in the side of my head with his elbow, followed through with a head butt that sent me back biting my tongue. I absorbed the blows and spat blood.

"Come on then!"

Chronos came at me, immaculately dressed and grinning like the madman we both were. His fist flew swift and true, faster than my fatigued and shaken mind could follow. I spat out a tooth as the world shook, deafening in its dizzying silence. The ship spun beneath my feet, but I shook it away and returned a blow in kind...

...with my mythrill hand. Chronos' jaw cracked beneath my fist and he fell to one knee. The world was still spinning and I was very nearly sick. The punches, although few, were backed with such raw anger that I was already blinking in and out of consciousness. Mayhap the day's other events had something to do with that, as well.

With a surge of unexpected speed Chronos launched himself back up and slammed the top of his head into my chin! My teeth, those that remained, clicked shut with enough force to sever my tongue. For a small mercy, that didn't happen, but I stumbled from the blow, lashing out wildly with my unique hand and landing a glancing blow above the son of a bitch's ear.

We danced apart, blood splattering the deck around us both. The grin on my face felt like it hurt, but I was detached from the pain, always had been. Chronos snarled and came at me.

"Ha!" I laughed, dodged his clumsy tackle and ran around the crystal platforms on the bridge. He came at me again, and again we traded blows, but there was no real heat in it now. Just two men, two men who were more than men – or less – trying to beat one another into fatal submission.

Chronos stood before the splintered railings, silhouetted against the fading sun in the twilight, and lit in the eerie green light from the dome encasing Atlantis below. He was beaten and bloody, his right eye fused shut. I'd managed to dent that pretty face at least.

"Is this the best you can do?" he asked me.

I ran at him, and of course he'd been expecting that, and dived to the side, spinning on the spot and landing a bloody fist to the back of my neck. I saw stars as I tried to recover, heading straight for the edge of the ship, ready to topple over into the indifferent sky.

I tried to do a back flip up and off the railing to save my fall, realised just past the point of no return that I had no idea how to do any sort of flip, and landed hard on my arse.

Chronos laughed. Drops of his blood splattered against the deck. "You are truly an idiot. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Hero of Time, the Saviour of Mankind, the Chosen One and the Boy Who Lived – HARRY JAMES POTTER!"

He didn't attack me, as defeated as I looked lying on the scorched deck. "Was this your doing? Your plan all along?" I asked him. "To

bring back Atlantis screaming from the depths of long forgotten time?"

"Oh no, Harry James Potter." Chronos laughed. "This was all you – always and forever you! Two worlds, two worlds merged back into one and this is only the beginning!"

He helped me to my feet.

So I tried to kill him.

I roared pure, violent hate and tackled the demigod around his waist and hauled him up and over the shattered rails of the Reminiscence. We both went over, toppled off the side of the ship, out into the clear twilit sky.

And fell.

We fell still throwing punches. Chronos' knee slammed into my gut, knocking the wind out of me, but my swirling mythril hand did all the talking necessary and I felt his nose break under the force of my return fire.

We fell apart, broken and bleeding the pair of us, down above the Lost City sheathed within my power, down toward the ravaged coast with its flaming towns and buckled roads. I fell and didn't feel any inclination to slow my descent, to fight the inevitable. For a moment I let myself pretend that I could die and stay dead, that the fall would kill me for good...

But reality was a harsh mistress, as harsh as time and those precious moments between one second and the next... To die would blast my soul back across time and I would not be able to physically survive the trip. I would be caught in a loop of mindless agony, never to truly live again, upon the screeching gears of the Infernal Clock.

It was tempting, oh so tempting, but I was more than that, wasn't I? Didn't I stand for more – exist for more? I hadn't sacrificed so much so many times to slow down at the finish line.

Chronos came flying in out of nowhere and crashed into me. I didn't try to stop him. He wrapped his legs around my waist, grasped my head between his two good hands and made sure I had a good view of the white-fire in his eyes. His bloody grin through his broken teeth was insanely familiar... like looking in a mirror.

"The truly great adventures, Harry James Potter," he said, and I could hear his voice in my mind – wild and chaotic – as well as in my ears. The truly great adventures... well, they never end, do they?

He was crying. Honest tears, alight with the literal fire in his eyes, burnt steady tracks through the blood on his beaten and swollen face.

"Who are you?" I asked quietly. With the wind roaring about us and the ground running up fast, I doubted he could hear me, but he did.

"Nothing you have ever done..." will last, Harry James Potter. And perhaps that is for the best. His maniacal grin faded away into what I could only discern as contemplative reflection. Chronos looked puzzled. "In time the answers will come, yes, yes, and deep down in the angry, raw core of your soul... you already know who I am."

He began to laugh. Oh, death... and then he leaned forward and slammed his forehead against mine, loosing his legs around my middle and disappearing in a puff of unnecessary dark, menacing smoke.

I laughed, as well, dazed from the blow and seeing double as the world began to spin around me. The ground was the sky was the ground was the sky was the sky—

I started flapping my arms like a bird – laughing and laughing and spinning – hoping for the best. My awesome captain's hat was still firmly attached, thanks to the sticking charm. I could feel my right eye swelling shut from Chronos' parting shot. Repaid in kind, yes sir, t'is the way of the universe.

Moments from death and endless torment I reached for one of the wands buried deep in my pocket, hoping mine was still there, and slowed my fatal descent.

It wasn't yet time to die. But I wished that time would hurry the fuck up.

I scowled. Any mention of time always made me twitch. Time was mine. "Time is not a river," I said, and I'd come to believe that – somewhere, somewhen. "Time is an ocean caught in a storm, Professor."

To that Dumbledore said nothing.

Back aboard the Reminiscence, I was alone and beaten. My body was failing. I hadn't slept for days and the latest brawl had really taken its toll. Don't get me wrong, I love a good fistfight, but even I had my limits.

"Accio briefcase!"

The day was descending toward night now. Time was slipping away. I managed to steer the ship around the sword impaled in her controls and set the course north once again, north to Hogwarts. The fight wasn't over yet. It was never truly over. But I didn't have the heart for it anymore.

"Oh there you are, sweetheart," I whispered, digging around in my case for the bottle of scotch I'd paid a small fortune for in London, before London had started to burn.

I broke the seal, popped the cork, and took a long, healthy swig of fifty-year old liquid gold. The flavour was perfect, the spice of the drop almost like rum, but better, so much better. Was there anything more satisfying than a perfect sip of amber scotch?

No, there wasn't, but I didn't care anymore. There was no one to care for. They had all abandoned me, and in my mind was nothing but memories of them dying – dying and leaving me.

I remembered everything. Every life. From the first desperate attempt, to travelling back in time and resolving to make a difference, and again and again... An endless cycle of loss and defeat, of power gone mad and absurd indignation.

The scotch hurt going down, but it was fair and pure.

I didn't care. There was no one left to stop me. Perhaps I had been wrong, after all.

Perhaps it was time to die. At long last, in the crimson wake of all I had ever been and done, perhaps victory had become indistinguishable from defeat.

Mayhap death, or as close as I could come to it, was the redemption and salvation I sought.

"What do you think?" I asked aloud of the empty battleship. "Speak now or forever hold your peace..."

Alone and tired, in great pain and feeling old – so very, very old – I raised my bottle of scotch and inclined it toward the horizon. A toast, a salute, to all that I had ever been, in all the lives of my long existence, and to all that I could never be.

Wearied resolve had turned to dark acceptance – and it was lonely, here at the end. But I wasn't quite through...

There was one last parting shot to convey, because even if this was the end, I couldn't change who I was – time and death had shown that to me more than once across the long years. A closing remark on the whole distasteful matter then, one last effort...

A final fuck you to say to the Dark Lord.

"Trust him, Harry," Grace said. She was holding Jason's head in her lap, stroking his hair. He was unconscious, a nasty bruise swelling across his brow. "You have to trust in something."

I met her eyes, sapphire-blue and pretty. "Grace Connor... why did you come along?" A spent, mirthless chuckle escaped me. "We all know why, don't we. Very well."

Fleur gone. Grace missing. Tonks lost and Jason most likely dead. Well, I'd had worse results getting this far...

Hogwarts was approaching, less than thirty miles away now. I could almost smell the forest, see the snow-capped mountains, and hear the flags of the old school flapping in the breeze. I was going home, but home had been invaded.

The last vestiges of twilight clung to the world, and long thin stratus clouds were strung across the sky. The Reminiscence was shaking, deep clunking sounds were emanating from within the belly of the beast. She was dying. Time for one last push.

I urged the throttle forward, and a strange calm descended over my mind. Something had changed again, but I couldn't place it.

I took a swig from my bottle of scotch, enjoyed the burn – never with ice – and sensed a presence standing behind me.

"Hey Jude, my headache is gone. Can you believe that?"

Grace Connor put a delicate hand on my shoulder. "You're about to lose, Harry, you're about to die. You know what will happen if you do."

"Time to drop the act, don't you think, sweetheart?"

Grace came to stand alongside me, looking fresh and innocent. Her form shimmered and Grace... Saturnia... became taller, stunningly beautiful, and wrapped in that same, stunning red dress she had kissed and stabbed me in way back in Italy, all those long days ago. "How long have you known it was me?"

"I had suspicions right from the start." I shrugged. "You people forget I've done this all before. I've known Grace Connor more than once. You wore her face well, but you didn't have her soul... And I knew for sure in Atlantis, when you gutted that frask with a piece of mythril. That could never have been Grace."

Saturnia tilted her head. "You didn't call me out of disguise, Harry?" Her smile was luscious, her lips full. "We could have had so much fun. Why ever not?"

I shrugged again, steering the ship now over highland plains. Hogsmeade was just over the horizon – and then, Hogwarts. Hoggy-woggy-Hogwarts. "Friends close, enemies closer... also you saved Tonks' life, even though you probably killed the real Grace."

"She didn't suffer."

I stared straight ahead and not at the beautiful, murderous woman caressing my mythril hand. "It doesn't matter now... done is done. And done a thousand times before." I actually laughed. Maybe that was the scotch working its own special brand of magic. "Do you know it has been centuries, honest to God centuries, that I've had that headache. It's gone... I feel free, lighter, somehow. Like I'm already dead."

Saturnia nodded. "Your lightning bolt scar is bleeding."

"Yeah, that still hurts, more and more the closer I get to the snake-faced bastard. We're almost at the castle now."

"Time to ease back on the speed a touch then, don't you think?" Saturnia asked, raising one delicate eyebrow.

The Reminiscence was trying to jump out of my control, but I kept a firm grip on the column, forcing the crystal platform to obey me. "No, I don't think so, not this time..." I pushed the throttle down, old runes flared, and the ship's speed increased, faster and faster. I intended to burst through the sound barrier.

A moment later, I did just that. A great, resounding sonic boom ripped across the sky, and a white halo of condensed air formed in our wake. We rocketed forward, faster and faster, screaming across the heavens.

"Did you stab Jason?" There was Hogwarts! Magnificent Hogwarts. Miles away, still, and almost tiny set against the shining silver lake. But the sight of it was... a relief. It was almost over. Two minutes, maybe a fraction less.

Time... had finally run out.

Saturnia nodded. "I needed him and Tonks out of the way, so Chronos could force your hand and give Atlantis a chance to rise again. Tonks fell in love with Jason, Harry, and he with her, while you were seeking the Infernal Clock with Lord Voldemort. You gave them months to love each other, in the mere hours you were warring in another world. Now, please stop what you're about to do."

"Why?"

"I've great affection for you, and you know what will happen should you die."

I nodded, staring at everything and nothing. The castle was so beautiful in the faded glow of the dark heavens overhead. "The world will reset, the universe skips a beat... and I won't survive the trip back again." I took a deep breath. "I'll die and keep dying back at the start, as my body, brain, and soul can no longer take the impossible time-travel. I'll be caught in a crippling cycle, I'll be ending the world, but after awhile I reckon I won't be able to feel it anymore... I'll just be... ground down to nothing."

A certain fate, at long last. A determined destiny. For the first time since her appearance, I met Saturnia's beautiful gaze.

"Non-existence is better than endless existence," I said, and that was the sum of all my wisdom, of all my years resolved into seven short words.

A tear fell from Saturnia's eye, cutting a track down her flawless cheek into the corner of her mouth. "And how many times will you die in screaming agony, Harry, before you no longer feel it?"

"Sweetheart," I said, and tipped my awesome captain's hat back on my head, "how many times have I already died in screaming agony?" I could remember them all now, every last one. Power, terrible power, coursed through my veins. "I'm just a badly written song stuck on repeat, baby."

Another tear. Saturnia struggled against them, struggled to compose herself. She couldn't do it, and the tears fell like light rain – misery's what happens when you stop and count the cost, lady, don't ever forget it.

"You can't die – there's still so much to do."

"I'm clocking off—"

"You can't!"

Couldn't I? "Fucking watch me. Its four minutes to twelve, Saturnia – midnight in the minds of insanity! Ha-fuckity-ha-ha-ha!"

I steered the ship on a collision course with the crenulated turrets of the Astronomy Tower, the heart of the castle. Voldemort was in there, secure in his conquered domain. I'd ram this ship so far up his ass he'd be choking on cannons and sails in a few seconds. Haha! I had to be insane, didn't I? No doubt anymore, despite my cleared and cleansed memory. I felt cut loose without that headache – a pain I had carried for centuries – born free under this endless sky.

Saturnia took a deep breath. Standing behind me, she slipped her arms under mine and wrapped her hands across my chest. I hated this woman. Hated all that she had stood for, Beatles and all. And yet... Her body was warm against mine, and soft.

So very soft and human.

"Harry Potter," Saturnia whispered. "Harry James Potter. You brave, tireless boy. All the worlds forgive me for keeping you alive, but Harry, sweet Harry..."

Don't. Please don't.

"...Fleur is pregnant."

My hands fell away from the controls and I whipped my head around so fast to face the demigoddess. We fell into a rough embrace, forged in the blood covering my body. My mouth went dry, I struggled for words... a thousand thousand thoughts sped through my mind.

A lot of little things suddenly made sense. Fleur choosing to leave, her rare fury and anguish... the irrevocable hurt I had caused her.

This was something new. Something that had never happened before.

Oh, oh damn...

A few impossibly long heartbeats later, the Atlantean battleship Reminiscence crashed into the Astronomy Tower with all the fury of every life I had ever lived.

The starlight core erupted and the ship disintegrated in a chaotic storm of old brick, ancient magic, and splintered wood – the impact ended my insane run through the sound barrier, air rushed back in through the wake, loud enough to end the whole damn world.

And oh god, what an awful world it was...

Night turned to day as a hellish fireball of superheated energy engulfed the ancient, triumphant majesty of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

A/N: Dun, dun, dun! Cliffhanger...ish. And yes, your tears of hate and frustration are delicious. This was the last chapter of Wastelands of Time. Yes, it was. However, there will be an epilogue up and running in a few days that will resolve this ending here. It's mostly written, so

look out for that soon. Once again, thanks for reading, this isn't the end of the story – but it is very close.

If you're looking for something to read in the meantime, I'm gonna swing my hefty writer balls around and suggest *A Clock On The Face of Hell* by *IdSayWhyNot*. A new story, time-travel, but shaping up rather nicely. Go find it and review that instead of this – I've got enough reviews.

Or review both, actually. Now there's a good idea.

Okay, all the best, folks,

Joe out.

Harry Potter and the Wastelands of Time

There are only two worlds – your world, which is the real world, and the other worlds, the fantasy. Worlds like this are worlds of the human imagination; their reality, or lack of reality, is not important. What is important is that they are there. These worlds provide an alternative. Provide an escape. Provide a threat. Provide a dream, and power; provide refuge, and pain. They give your world meaning. They do not exist, and thus they are all that matters.

Do you understand?

~FFVI

Epilogue – Still On Time's Watch

Hey, man, sing me a song...

~Five For Fighting

I can't stop singing along, I thought, and yes, I was alive enough to think it.

Moments – mere crystal moments buried within the maelstrom – before I'd flown the Reminiscence into Hogwarts I had Disapparated, side-along with Saturnia, smashing right through the school's anti-apparation wards and saving my life.

And her life.

I don't know why.

From the shores of the lake half a mile away, water lapping at our heels, we watched the starlit-fireball disintegrate the Reminiscence and engulf the school in its heat and energy. I clutched the open bottle of scotch against my side, wincing in tired regret.

The flame absorbed great swaths of the old castle, tremendous cracks rippled through the stone and every window was blown out,

including those high, tall stained-glass sentinels guarding the Great Hall.

The ward schemes protecting the castle ruptured, as well, as my jaunt through the anti-apparation barriers disrupted their flow. Great, resounding claps of old magic falling into the abyss eclipsed the burning glory of Hogwarts!

Yeehaw, I thought, admiring the chaos, for there is beauty in chaos, but my heart wasn't truly in it.

"Did you finally kill Lord Voldemort, Harry?" Saturnia asked. She was supporting most of my weight. It was all I could do to keep my eyes open, given the bottomless fatigue wracking my body.

"No..." I said. "I can still feel him, furious and unharmed. He's fled to the south – Disapparated away as the wards came crashing down. Probably got some Death Eaters with that blast though."

The fireball was collapsing back in on itself, leaving scorched and ruined stone in its wake. For the most part, the castle still stood – broken, dilapidated – but still standing proud. The Astronomy Tower had shielded most of the seventh floor and Dumbledore's office from the assault... but it was crumbling.

With an aching groan of archaic stone, cemented over a thousand years ago, the foundations gave way and the tower fell into silence, through the smoke of the ruined ship and, as the world held its breath, slammed into the ground – a tower of rubble, a monument to my colossal mistakes.

I was knocked from my feet by the impact, falling arse-over-head into the lake. I lay there in the shallows for a moment, dreaming sweet dreams of sleep and mercy in a place free of wasted time – free of time at all.

"You really were going to kill yourself," Saturnia said, not bothering to make it a question.

"Yes, I was." The remains of the loot we had plundered in Atlantis were scattered across the ground and amongst the ruins. Thousands of glittering gold coins and tonnes of mythrill bricks. I clenched my silver-myrthril hand. Indestructible.

"And what of your friends and allies in the castle? Have you just killed them too?"

I shook my head. "No, the Hogwarts Express doesn't leave London... what's left of London... until tomorrow. September 2nd. I sent Neville to convince Dumbledore of that and reinforced the notion in my letter to him before we left for Atlantis. Voldemort seized Hogwarts uncontested. I have merely driven him out."

It took a lot of effort, and I waved away Saturnia's attempts to aid me, but I managed to stand, dripping wet, face swollen from my fight with Chronos and my heart piercing my soul with every beat. That shard was well and truly embedded.

For a wonder, my awesome captain's hat remained stuck to my head. "So let's recap the day's events. London ablaze, Atlantis reborn, and Hogwarts crumbling. I think you and Chronos had a hand in the Atlantis play, but the rest is on me, isn't it?" I didn't say aloud the main thought running hot and true through my mind.

Saturnia did. "And Fleur is pregnant, Harry. I was not trying to deceive you. I imagine the child can only be yours, yes, from your time spent together in Atlantis."

I nodded, staring at the burning castle – into the stark, distant future. It all looked bleak and blackened, smoking and cracked. I remembered every life I had ever lived, and not once had there been a child. Not once. I had thought the impossible time-travel had made me impotent, but apparently not... my boys could swim, god save any child born to me as their father.

"What answers can you give me?" I asked the demigoddess. She was beautiful, untouched and undamaged by the chaos. Her hair reflected the golden flames licking at the castle. "Where do we go from here?"

"You are asking me?" Saturnia seemed genuinely surprised. "After all I've done?"

"Why bring Atlantis back?"

"That was your doing—"

"NO!" I kept a rein on my temper, barely, yet my wand was itching in my palm to unleash all manner of dark and dreadful magic. I had been used, betrayed, and was apparently going to be a daddy. Everything was so different this life around... times had changed. "No, Saturnia." I took a deep breath. "Be gone then. But understand that one day, one day soon, you and a great many innocent people are going to regret keeping me alive today."

Saturnia smiled and leaned in close. Her breath was warm on my face. She kissed me softly, mindful of my split lips and bruised face. "I look forward to the chaos, Harry Potter."

"Last time will count for all," I spat as she shimmered away into nothing, leaving me standing sodden and bleeding before the destruction of my only true home.

You, a father? God save that poor child...

That's what I said.

Yeah, but you didn't mean it.

That same night, I returned to Hogwarts after making several trips across the land.

I had broken into an apothecary and stolen some healing potions, as well as a Muggle tailor's and 'borrowed' a new suit. The one I had been wearing was all kinds of ruined, well beyond repair. A pair of leather gloves concealed my mythrill hand. I stole some cash, too, and rented a hotel room in Edinburgh to fix myself up.

Showered, shaved, and feeling kind of human, despite my eternal memories and fathomless fatigue, I returned to the school I had so recently destroyed.

As it was, I found myself entering Hogwarts through the Entrance Hall and making my way slow and steady through the castle to Dumbledore's office. Several of the corridors were impassable, collapsed or worse, and the moving staircases had ceased to do so...

I could have simply apparated into the old man's office, but I wanted to assess the overall damage. In my mind were clear memories of what Hogwarts was, how it all fit together. I knew more about the school and its secrets than anyone who had ever lived, and I wanted to take stock, to take a measure of responsibility for the damage I had done.

The gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's office wasn't manning its post when I arrived, so I let myself in.

The room was a shambles. My explosion had knocked the shiny instruments from their tables, the portraits from the walls, upturned Dumbledore's desk and sent Fawkes' perch tipping into the window alcove. I picked up the chair opposite the desk and sat down amidst the mess.

And waited.

I waited and tried hard not to think beyond the immediate future – or the immediate past. So many memories of past lives, of things I had to do to prevent so many little things from happening, clambered in my mind, clawing for attention.

I don't know how long I sat alone in Hogwarts, but it wasn't long before I began to fall asleep. At first I struggled against the fatigue, as always, but after all this time awake it now seemed not only wrong but pointless.

I let the nightmares come.

It was slumped in the chair, troubled yet asleep, that Dumbledore found me some time later. I awoke with a start to his gentle hand on my shoulder, automatically reaching for my wand and only relaxing when the headmaster came into focus before me. I needed a new pair of glasses at some point.

"Good evening, Harry," Albus Dumbledore said, his tone soft and grandfatherly. "I must say, I admire your choice of headwear."

I managed to sit up in my chair and inclined my captain's hat to the old man. Dumbledore turned and plodded around his office, setting things to right with a quick wave of his wand. After a few moments, he took his familiar seat opposite me across his desk and folded his hands patiently across the beard tucked into his belt.

I tried to find a good place to start... and came up empty.

"Lost for words?" Dumbledore mused. "Surely not after all this time, Harry. I imagine you are here to tell me why Hogwarts is wounded, why a mysterious city is encased in a deadly magic off the western shores of England, and why the Ministry Obliviators will be claiming exorbitant amounts of overtime in London tonight."

I opened my mouth, thoughts and thoughts running through my mind, and then simply just shrugged.

Dumbledore nodded. "Or perhaps why you look so beaten, my boy, and where Miss Delacour and Miss Tonks may be found. Perhaps you are here to tell me where Lord Voldemort is hiding, and what his plans are. Harry, perhaps you are here to tell me why the goblins seek your demise, and why the infamous Miguel Blue, the North American Crime Lord, is upset with you."

I found my voice. "I could tell you all that, all that and more, but I'm actually here to make sure everyone is safe. The Weasleys, the Grangers, the Longbottoms and the Lovegoods. Everyone, Professor, everyone I mentioned in my letter."

"All accounted for, Harry, and all safe within the Burrow." Dumbledore's gaze turned a few degrees hotter, his tone less friendly. "You look tired beyond measure."

I guess I owed the old man some answers. And perhaps it was time to confide in someone the madness that gripped my heart and my soul.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "The last few weeks – and it has only been weeks – since I awoke at Privet Drive for the last time... they have been tiring, Dumbledore. And so very, very trying. More so than ever before. Not all of it has made sense, there are vast changes between the start and the end, but we're still here, I made it this far." I didn't know how to go on, not really. "I don't know how to explain all of this without sounding far too sane..."

Don't you mean insane? No, not at this point.

"Why, you are a time-traveller, of course," Dumbledore said, stroking his beard. "And does that not explain the heart of the matter?"

I chuckled. "It usually takes even you a bit longer to figure that out." Weary resignation eclipsed my tone. "Then again, I suppose things are different this time around."

Dumbledore sighed, assessing the weight and tragedy in my words against reflection of his own long experiences in this world. His own regret. "Oh, Harry. Truly? You have travelled to this past more than once?"

The hint of pity in his words angered me. "I'm older than Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore."

I've learnt never to dread silence – even an awkward time-travelling silence. I knew my true age as I knew all the lives and all the years of my existence. It was of little consequence, after all this time, that I hadn't succeeded. The odds were always high, the enemies always changing the game... or maybe that was just me? Mayhap I was never meant to win, Sleeping God or no...

"I need you to understand, Professor, that the nature of the world has changed. The very fabric of our reality has been stretched thin by the actions of Voldemort and myself in the realms of Forget." I shook my head. "Atlantis is here. Now. I destroyed that city. I watched it burn. And yet it exists again... like it's following me."

My laughter was without mirth, without sanity.

"Has this happened before?"

"Never." I knew that with absolute certainty. "It's an impossibility, which just confirms what I've known since I was killed in Diagon Alley a few weeks ago – that this life, this time, is my last. It counts for all, sir, and already the odds are stacked so high against me."

"Against us, Harry." Dumbledore leaned across his desk to place his dying hand on my shoulder. A curse I couldn't cure... not with Voldemort still alive... and I had not yet found a way to kill that son of a bitch. "We will find a way."

I smiled – mirthless insanity once again. "You always say that, and I always believe it. Old fools, the both us." My grin faded. "But you need to understand, Professor, the war that's coming now... it won't be wands under the Ministry, or simple curse light tossed back and forth in the night. It will be a war of True Magic, of—"

I had to stop and take a breath. My little piece of eternity, my shard of forever, buried deep within my heart, was singing a song to end the world. Ice coursed through my veins, pain as fresh and bright as the sun crippled me. At least I no longer had a headache. Small graces, all I could expect...

I let the breath out long and slow, as was my way of living in the moment. "I'm okay, just a little heartburn. Heh. Where was I? Oh yeah... Voldemort will turn cities to smoke. He will command the oceans to drown nations, the sky to fall in a rain of cold, blue fire. True Magic, Professor, and I am all that can even come close to stopping him."

Dumbledore accepted all of that in his stride. "There are several warrants out for your arrest. You can't return to Hogwarts, Harry."

"I have places I can go. People I need to see. We've a war to fight, after all."

"And how will you fight it on the run? We need to face the Ministry and clear your name."

"All in good time," I promised. "There are more important matters to attend to first."

"Such as?"

I smiled. "Please come with me."

Together Dumbledore and I descended through the school. Smoke stained the walls and an acrid smell of burning stone permeated the otherwise cool, silent night air. It was a slow walk down through the destruction, yet after some time, close to midnight now, if I was any judge after all the years, we found ourselves standing on the grounds of Hogwarts and looking back at the school in ruins.

Dumbledore sighed. "Did it really have to come to this?"

I couldn't help but laugh. "It always comes to this, Professor. Ten times out of ten. This time, however, this time..." I trailed away and withdrew my wand from my inner suit pocket.

Memories of Hogwarts ran clear and true in my head. Of Hogwarts as it should be, not as this smouldering wreck. I had caused so much damage in the past, and today alone, that perhaps it was time to start atoning for that guilt. Complexities of time and death aside, perhaps it was time to do the right thing.

"What are you doing?" Dumbledore asked.

"Remaking the future," I said. "With wasted memories of the past."

Silent magic began to flow from my wand. Streams of colour lit up the cool night air, a harmonic rainbow of soundless light, and settled against the scorched brick and fallen stone of the castle.

I began to whisper Atlantean runes – the full catalogue now accessible inside my head. I had access to more power than any wizard on the face of the earth, and I could use it for this, for all the times I had seen Hogwarts Castle fall, by my wand or Voldemort's.

Runes swam along the cords of fierce light emanating from my wand. The mounds of rubble and fallen stone that had been the Astronomy Tower began to shake and then rise. Cracked brick started to spin, levitate and fuse back together. And it happened fast.

"Oh my," Dumbledore said at my side. "Harry, my dear boy..."

I fused the repaired bricks of the tower with the discarded pallets of mythril blocks, stolen from Atlantis, and set them into the foundations of the castle. Every corridor I had collapsed I remade, reinforced with the strength of the Lost City. Shattered glass flew back into place, unbroken and whole.

The magic was all there. In my head. Cities to smoke, I had told Dumbledore, but the understanding whispered deep from within the Infernal Clock could also turn smoke into cities.

And I didn't even break a sweat.

A few minutes later and Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry stood remade against the night sky – stronger than ever. I lowered my wand and heard Dumbledore chuckling low beneath his breath.

I began to laugh, as well. We both laughed – just a tired pair of old men – because, as always, it was either laugh or cry... measured within and against the crimson price of all that had been gained and lost.

"A few of the rooms, particularly in the Astronomy Tower, may need refurbishing. But I guess the school year can begin tomorrow after all. Just as soon as we get the wards back up and running."

A tear fell from Dumbledore's eye and was caught in his beard. "That was a truly amazing feat of magic, Harry."

Yes, yes it was. But this was only the beginning.

"Don't worry," I said. "The best is yet to come."

Time.

It always comes back to time, does it not? Wasted time. Wastelands of Time. If there is to be redemption, Harry, mayhap even salvation, you will not find it along the light-blasted plains of Oblivica – across these desolate, these despised Wastelands.

Where then?

You'll have to figure that one out on your own.

The beach was familiar, as was the surf and the pathway leading up into the seaside community. The streets were busy, for a lazy weekday afternoon, and the sky overcast yet warm. A light drizzle made the air humid and easy to breathe.

I found the shop within five minutes. And, if I was being honest, it only felt like five minutes since I had last been here. But – and oh god – it had been centuries. Honest, endless centuries.

I almost walked away, but I hadn't made it this far, survived and not survived so much, to turn away now. I was better than that, at least I tried to be, and I had come across the face of the world for this.

A bell tinkled above the shop door as I entered. It was dim inside, not dark, just comforting. There was the scent of roasting coffee beans on the air, engrained into the polished mahogany wood of the shelves upon shelves of books, and freshly baked muffins.

The last home I had visited had blown up. All at once this felt like a new home. Baby, I'd been here before... but it wasn't, not really. Time may not be linear, yet I had come to learn there was no going back, not really. Only forward. And if I could be afforded a second chance, or a lifetime of them, then it may as well have been for the first time, for all that anyone else could remember the chaos.

I didn't see the reason I was here, not behind the counter or at the coffee machine. There were only a handful of customers in the heavy leather couches, flicking between different books and sipping from large mugs. No sign of dark hair with a streak of soft blonde.

I began to browse, meandering between the shelves and running my hands along the spines of the thousands of books. My journey took me through History, Crime, over to Fantasy and diving through Horror – story of my life, if you please. But there was no sign of my goal. Perhaps I had come all this way for nothing.

I turned to leave.

"Have we met before?"

Tessa was standing behind me. Every inch of her as perfect as I remembered. To think all my memories were in order, and then to see her, to be close enough to catch her scent – a light mix of cinnamon and peppermint – brought a tumult of conflicting thought and emotion, almost enough to make me feel human again. Her hair was pulled back into a working ponytail, her narrow face caught the light, and her name badge stood stark above her breasts, upon a black shirt bearing the name of the bookshop.

"You look familiar," she said. "Have we met before?"

Oh now there was an unfair question. Only forever ago, sweetheart. It was also an impossible question. There was no way Tessa could remember anything of the life we had spent together. No vestiges of worlds torn from the sky, of perfection within nightmare. Only nothing, boss, because love can't change the weather.

Because the life we had spent together did not exist. Only in my mind, and only there in shattered fragments of spent regret. It was a shame I remembered them all so clearly – a magnificent, unfair, lovely curse, that had brought me back here today.

"I think I'd remember meeting you," I said, ever the charming, ever the oblivious, ever the handsome, heroic fool of time...

Tessa bit her lip and frowned at me in a cute, bemused kind of way. In her own charming-ever-oblivious way, she was just as beautiful as Fleur and Tonks. "What high school do you go to?"

Ah, and there we go. No deeper meaning and no desperate tragic memories of past lives floating to the surface across her mind. Just a passing familiarity to some goofy, bespectacled kid she probably saw at her school. The small pang of disappointment that bled through my chest was just stupid, arrogant hope fading away. For a moment there, I'd thought fate had handed me a small reprieve from hell.

Apparently that was not on the cards – not now not ever, boss, can ya shut up and put up? Or do I need to get the whip? Not even a vague memory of a memory, Potter. The girl just ain't that interested.

"I don't know you. I've never met you. You have a beautiful name."

Well, that was that then. I hadn't expected anything less really. I shrugged and left the shop, leaving Tessa behind with half a smile on her face. I didn't know why I had come here, all the way to Australia. It had just seemed necessary.

It should have been Fleur I was visiting, the woman carrying my child, before I plunged myself back into war – before Voldemort, before the Ministry, before the goblins or Miguel Blue caught up with me. So many enemies, so little time. To be honest, I was afraid to go see Fleur.

I guess I'd just wanted to see Tessa's face again, alive and unharmed. That was the reason of doing any of this in the first place, and why I was now old enough to have lived over a thousand years ago. Oh well.

Silly, really, and slightly insane. But then sanity was a rare commodity 'round these parts.

Maybe yes.

Maybe no.

And when you got right down to it anyway, trying to justify the morality of the choices made, it didn't come down to much. Salvation, redemption... absolution and retribution... they were just mere words compared to the strength of my true intent.

I headed back down to the beach in my fancy suit and strolled into the shallows of the Indian Ocean. The water was cool yet refreshing, the swell not too busy and the gentle waves crashing just before me, spraying my face with a swash of salty droplets.

It was all just wasted time caught between one moment and the next, right?

The last thousand years of my life could be chalked up to that sentiment alone. Which was a sad thought, lacking any sort of resolve.

I have written this beginning so many times now – an old soul standing in an old ocean, trying desperately to transcend the bounds between time and space and walk the thin, desperately dangerous line of the best good intentions...

Atlantis had returned.

My enemies were as dangerous as ever – made more so, perhaps, by the return of the Lost City.

Saturnia and Chronos had an end game, because everyone always did. After all, if they had wanted to watch the world burn then why try to change things at all... I had been doing quite well on my own with that particular fire. Voldemort stood apart, as always, waiting for our final battle, the one that would count for all.

And this last time would have to count for all, because the game had well and truly changed.

Fleur was pregnant. There was a new life at stake. And I found myself caring about that.

"A child..." I muttered, licking the saltwater from my lips. "What do you know..."

I began to laugh – and the sound was foreign to my ears, because it was not the mindless, insane ramblings that so often marred my existence, but laughter with a ring of truth to it. And, dare I say it, hope.

No, surely not. Did I have a reason to make a difference again? Endless years stretched back through my mind, all the way back to the start, charting the demise of my true intent, the fall of my resolve, scattered to dust and less than dust along the barren wastelands of time. Had that changed?

So many wasted lives, so many broken promises. Had I actually made a difference after so long?

Maybe yes and maybe...

...yes.

A tremendous weight lifted from my shoulders – the weight of long regret – and just like my eternal headache it was gone forever. Laughter again, truer than crystal, as rays of pure, clear sunlight shot through the blanket of clouds overhead.

This wasn't the end. No, sir. But after all the long years, the impossible millennium, it may have finally been the beginning. Hmm...very well.

I guess it was time to go save the world.

The End of Wastelands of Time

A/N: There we go then. Wastelands of Time is done and dusted. Please review and let me know how it went. I'll keep this brief. There will be a sequel – it will be online soon – tentatively titled Harry Potter and the Heartlands of Time. Take what you will from that.

It was a good story, I reckon. Not overly cliché and at times rather badass. If there is any failing, I'd say it lies in character development. Save for Harry, there just wasn't enough of it, all things considered, but I've got time to make amends in the sequel. Beyond that element, I'm pretty happy with Wastelands of Time. How about you?

That's about it. I've nothing left to say – if you've made it this far then you've read over 300,000 of my words, and I say thank you. Just know that every one of those words was written whilst I was naked. Yeah. Think on that. Bare-ass in ma writin' chair, ladies and gentlemen – and I'm extremely hairy.

And that's how I'll sign off. For now.

All the best,

-Joe